LANCER BOOKS 72-946 50¢

HOUSE OF SHADOWS

PROUDLY SHE JOINED HER NEW HUSBAND IN BATTLE WITH POWERFUL ENEMIES, NEVER KNOWING WHEN HIS FIERCE TEMPER MIGHT TURN AGAINST HER □ □

BY EVELYN BOND

author of Evil in the House

BRIDE OF DEATH?

Laura stood up and circled the table on her way to the door. Felix was at her side before she had taken a dozen steps.

In back of them was Janice Ulric's calm voice:

"You mustn't forget to be honest and tell the girl that you had to leave El Norte—"

"Keep walking," Felix whispered.

"—because you murdered a man with your bare hands," Janice Ulric finished.

Laura's steps didn't falter, and Felix remained at her side.

"And if you can murder one human being," Janice added just before the door was closed on her, "you just possibly might—"

HOUSE OF SHADOWS

EVELYN BOND

A LANCER ORIGINAL

A LANCER BOOK • 1965

The people in this novel are all imaginary, and not related in any way to actual people living or dead.

E.B.

HOUSE OF SHADOWS

Copyright © 1965 by Lancer Books, Inc.

All rights reserved

Printed in the U.S.A.

LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 185 MADISON AVE. • NEW YORK, N.Y. 10016

Part One

From a Find to a Check

ONE

It was a night to look back on with affection during the times that were to follow. Even during the worst of the terror that would fill so many of her nights in the near future, Laura Foster was able to recall the happenings of that one night, and to smile slightly as she did. Occasionally, however, she would ask herself if she could have realized at the time just how much was involved for her future with every confident gesture she made and every firm step that she took.

It was very difficult for Laura to recall that at the start of the particular night in question she had been cheerful and happy and pleasantly excited. It seemed to have happened a long time ago.

Laura stood in the kitchen and looked down at what was on the stove ledge before her. A lock of otherwise well-trained bright blonde hair swooped down in front

of one eye, but she was too deeply absorbed to push it back.

"No peppercorns," she said, glancing to the right of the defrosted duckling that was going to be braised in the next hour or so. "You forgot to bring peppercorns."

Rochelle Stoddard sighed. "I hope your boy friend's palate can get along without peppercorns."

"He's not just a boy friend." The trace of a smile stretched Laura's full, warm lips. "You know what I'm expecting from him tonight."

"Well, I certainly hope he does propose," Rochelle said, and looked quizzically at her friend. "I haven't even met him, whoever he is."

"His name is Felix Page and he's an architect, and I think he's going to be my—my—"

Laura couldn't make herself say the word, but it trembled in the evening air of the overheated kitchen. She turned away and took off the apron she'd been wearing.

Rochelle gave a puzzled frown. "What are you doing, honey? You haven't even started to cook this darned thing."

"I've got to go downstairs for the peppercorns."

"Are you fooling? I've heard that we're living in the age of mechanized cooking, and nobody in her right mind wants to fight a good trend just to show off for some man."

"I'm not showing off," Laura said, leaving the kitchen on her way to the hall closet. "I want Felix to know that I'm a good cook."

"It's not a point you'll ever have to prove, honey. If this fellow's got as much loot as you say he does, you'll be on easy street. Come to think of it, you haven't mentioned any other name all week at rehearsals except for this Felix, and I hope I'll get a chance to meet such a wonder man. For social purposes alone, I mean, I'd like to meet Felix what's-his-name."

"Felix Page, Ro, and of course you'll meet him sooner or later."

"As a matter of fact, one reason I volunteered for this culinary orgy is that I hope I'll manage to get a peek at him."

Laura, her winter coat half on, stopped herself in the act of checking the contents of her wallet. "Felix is —well, I suppose you'd call him shy. Nobody would expect that from a man who has to work so much with other people, and who needs to have all the social graces in order to make business contacts; but there it is. And he's very—well, you'll see for yourself sooner or later, Ro. I'll be back in a few minutes."

She had caught herself short of saying that Felix Page was quick-tempered. It was true, of course, but she didn't want anybody to think she might be criticizing him. And yet it was impossible to be with Felix and not get the feeling that he was controlling a disposition toward fierce and implacable anger. It showed clearly when he was touched by a disagreeable incident. She could remember one time when they'd been dancing together in a night club, and she'd been able to feel tension in the muscles of his left arm even though they touched her side so lightly.

She had asked, "Is anything wrong?"

"That waiter of ours has been so rude that I'd like to punch him till he's bowlegged."

"Well, the place is very busy tonight, and you can't know what kind of strains he's under."

"I'm under a worse strain on account of him."

"Well, if that's how you feel, you should punch him and work the inhibitions out of yourself."

Felix had thrown back his head and laughed. "Is that what you learned in dramatic school, Laura? To forget all your inhibitions and do what you want?"

Laura said quietly, "I was thinking about what *you* want."

Felix seemed to look at her, as if for the first time. He smiled, and she could feel the tension melting from his arm muscles.

As she'd nearly told her friend Rochelle just now, Felix Page was quick-tempered; but she added silently

that he could be soothed and calmed down by the right woman. And Laura knew that she was the right woman for Felix Page. She knew it was a compelling intensity that would not be denied.

She left the apartment at twenty minutes to seven, and promptly discovered that the West Seventies of Manhattan on a windy January night wasn't the easiest place in the world in which to buy peppercorns. One storekeeper reluctantly sent her to a competitor who, it turned out, did have a couple of them. To find a third one, she had to take a taxicab to a specialty store on Broadway, and then wished she had done just that when she had started out on her travels.

But she discovered that in her haste to buy what she needed she hadn't brought quite enough money with her. The store owner, seeing Laura's distress, gave her what she wanted and nodded cheerfully at Laura's fulsome promise to pay and to become a steady customer for as long as she'd be keeping an apartment in the general neighborhood. Like all of Laura's promises, that one was intended to be kept rigidly.

She opened her apartment door again at seven-fifteen, and promptly became aware of Rochelle's voice. Her friend was speaking clearly and well in what she sometimes called her sunshine tones. When Rochelle stopped, she was answered briefly by a man's voice.

Laura gasped when she heard that. With the peppercorns in one hand, she rushed into the living room.

"You're early," she said, still shocked.

Felix Page stood up in one motion, but recovered his poise instantly. The only lamplight in the room caught the sheen of his dark hair and the tan of his long, thin face. Bright blue eyes, wide open under their heavy lids, darted from her to Rochelle and came back to Laura again, perhaps thankfully.

"You're an hour too early," Laura said. "I've hardly begun to do the cooking."

He smiled, but didn't reply.

"What made you come so early, Felix?"

"I didn't have anything else to do."

Rochelle put in, "Well, now that you're here, Laura, I suppose I ought to leave."

She had been sitting with her back to Laura on one of the soft chairs, and she did not turn her head. It seemed that she couldn't make herself look away from Felix Page. Felix, in his turn, made a point of looking full at Laura, so that Rochelle wasn't able to see his face clearly at the moment.

"I'll take a little walk and come back," he offered.

"Whatever you like, Felix," Laura told him. "Don't let either of us chase you out of here."

Rochelle suddenly turned toward Laura. "Do you know something, honey? I've seen your Felix before somewhere, but I can't remember the time or place."

Felix said brusquely, "Probably at some party, as I told you before, when I was in New York City a few years ago."

His voice had become higher, but it hadn't gone out of control. He was fighting against some outburst of temper, though, and the effort showed plainly in his clenched, reddened fists.

"I'll probably remember where I know you from, when I'm on stage tomorrow," Rochelle said ruefully. "Maybe it'll turn out that you were my fourth husband."

Rochelle had never been married, Laura knew, and it must have been some devil's imp that caused her to remark about the brief duration of some marriages. Probably she wanted to amuse herself at his and Laura's expense.

Laura put in hurriedly, "You should see Rochelle on stage sometimes, Felix. She's very good. Right now she's rehearsing the lead role in the *Trial of Mary Dugan,* and even though the play is old-hat, you'd never know it from Rochelle's work on stage."

"You're a dear, Laura," Rochelle murmured. Her voice took on more strength and color. "But I'd still like to know where I've seen Felix before. There aren't so many dark, handsome men in the world that I'd forget even one of them."

The subject made Felix uncomfortable, and Laura sensed that he wasn't so much at ease in cold weather that he'd enjoy taking a walk at random. Rochelle, on the other hand, was having a good time as part of this conversation and wouldn't leave the room by any method short of force.

"Why not put on the television?" Laura asked, reaching for what seemed to be the only way out of her dilemma. "At least I'll know that you two are having a pleasant time while I'm in the kitchen working my fingers to the bone."

"You sound like a housewife already," Rochelle said with one of her bright and malicious stabs at the truth.

Felix turned abruptly and switched the set on, seemingly grateful for a chance to stay with his back toward Rochelle Stoddard's probing eyes.

Laura returned to the kitchen and the duck-to-be-braised. She expected no more trouble from what she had already started to think of as the recent living room crisis. There was nothing like having a small audience to bring out the amusingly malicious backbiter in Rochelle, and she could be even more entertaining when the subject under discussion was a truly distinguished member of her profession. A mutual friend of theirs, having heard Rochelle's opinion of an internationally respected actress, had called Rochelle a perfumed and powdered viper.

Laura was drying the cut wedges of duck, when the television sound soared almost deafeningly. A moment later, as she was placing the wedges into a deep, hot skillet, she realized that the television had been abruptly shut off. Then, as she gingerly raised one of the wedges with a warm spatula, she heard Felix Page's voice raised in furious anger.

Laura replaced the spatula and wiped both hands on the towel by her side. In the split second that she turned to the kitchen door, it opened abruptly on her colleague.

Rochelle Stoddard ran inside, her back rigid with

cold scorn. She glanced at the door and pointed beyond it angrily with both forefingers.

"Don't marry him," she said quickly. "Even if he asks you, don't. It'd be a lot smarter to kick him out and throw the duck after him."

Laura said briskly, "If you don't like Felix, then I'm afraid that's your personal problem."

" 'Like'? All I've done is to ask where I saw him before, and he keeps telling me not to bother him. The last time I brought it up, telling him I'd look for his picture when I was in the post office again (just a joke, of course) I swear that he made a rush for me as if he was going to—"

That was when Felix Page walked into the kitchen.

Under the glare of lights in the over-heated room, he looked red-faced, whether he was angry or not. He buttoned his dark blue jacket, licked his lips carefully and then blurted out:

"I'll leave if you want."

"Of course I don't want you to," Laura said calmly. "I think that both of you have been acting like a pair of babies; and especially you, Rochelle."

"Yes, I was almost convinced you'd think it was my fault, honey."

Rochelle had taken a couple of steps backward when Page came in, and now she stood next to Laura before the stove. She hadn't looked away from him at all, and there was a malice-edged fear in her eyes. For once, Laura thought in the self-confidence of a twenty-three year old, Rochelle looks nine years older than I do.

"No matter whose fault it is, let's forget it and relax," Laura said with all the patience that seemed left in her. "I don't want to have the two of you at each other's throats, Rochelle. If you'd just take things easy and talk about neutral subjects for a while, I'm sure that the two of you would get along well enough."

"In other words, if I played it like something in Oscar Wilde." Rochelle forced herself to smile. "Isn't this cold weather just awful for your Florida tan, Mr. Page?"

Felix Page didn't answer that. His breathing had become more ragged.

"There isn't a thing that will work with your friend except for a pair of shackles," Rochelle said. "Honey, it'll be a lot easier for you right now if I get away from here."

Laura hoped that her sudden relief wasn't too obvious when she said politely:

"Nobody's forcing you to go."

"That's a matter of opinion," Rochelle murmured. She stood with her feet apart, almost as if she were going to walk out sideways. "But when I leave, it'll only be good for your peace of mind tonight, and not in the long run."

Laura was able to keep from telling her friend that she, herself, would be only too glad to find out what was going to happen to her peace of mind in the weeks and months and years that lay ahead.

Quietly, Rochelle added, "There's one thing I want to tell you here and now—and in present company. ——Especially in present company."

Laura, nearly relaxed by the promised easing of tension, felt a sudden tightness along her middle, as if she had put on a belt that was several sizes too small.

"We'll be seeing each other tomorrow," she suggested without much hope of deflecting Rochelle from her stated purpose. "The two of us can do our talking then."

"No!" Rochelle paused, swallowed, and then apparently controlled herself so that she would sound unhurried and reflective. "People think I'm mean and sarcastic—and maybe I am. But I'm trying my best not to be either of those things now. Do you understand me, honey?"

Laura, unwilling to prolong matters by making any response, was quiet.

"Look, honey, you're a kid. You're twenty-three years old. You've got no parents and no relatives, so there isn't anybody you can go to who'll say what he really thinks about this boy friend of yours. You want

to become attached to somebody and you want to hold on to a man who'll be part of your life. I can understand it, and I sympathize. Believe me, Laura, I can see it from your angle."

Rochelle paused. Her eyes hadn't left Felix Page at any time, but now they grew steely.

"He's not the one for you. This fellow has got the most vicious temper I've ever seen in my life. When the two of you have any argument (and you're bound to, heaven knows) this one here is mean enough to put his hands on your throat and squeeze the li—"

Laura was never sure exactly how it happened. One moment Felix Page was glaring at Rochelle, hands taut and clenched at his sides. In the next moment he started to say something, couldn't bring out the words he wanted, and raised both hands. He had been leaning forward, but Laura never knew whether or not he took a step toward Rochelle.

Rochelle, though, moved as if her worst fears had come to life in front of her. She pulled back abruptly against the stove. The skillet shifted to one side. There was a sound of inhuman whistling, and then, with a metallic thump, the skillet landed on the floor, disgorging darkened wedges of duck meat.

"Oh Lord, honey, I'm sorry," Rochelle said briskly and mechanically. She'd recovered her poise only after Felix Page stepped back in surprise at the harsh sounds from the stove area. "All that work, and what you get for it is a lot of dirty linoleum."

Laura managed to say something controlled and pleasant; walk with her friend to the closet; and then to the door. Rochelle was quiet for once, probably thinking of a good exit line. Laura's suspicion of this was confirmed at the door. There, Rochelle glanced back to Laura, and apparently referring to the play about a murder trial which they were currently rehearsing, she said lightly:

"So long, honey, and I'll see you in court."

When Laura returned to the kitchen she saw that Felix Page was gravely at work, picking up the duck

wedges and laying them on a spread-out newspaper across the dinette table.

"I would think you can save it," he said, avoiding her eyes. "If not for ourselves, then maybe somebody who's got a dog can use the meat for him. You never know."

"Probably you're right," Laura said. The destruction of her evening's hopes was beginning to weigh on her, now that the shock was over; but she didn't want to make Felix uncomfortable by talking about it. "I can always open some cans for tonight, as I usually do."

"Let's have dinner out," Felix Page suggested. "What happened here is practically my fault, so the least I can do is make it up to you a little bit."

Laura was convinced with sinking heart that she'd get no marriage proposal from Felix Page in a public place. In the circumstances, though, there was nothing for her to do except give in to his wishes.

"All right."

"Good. I'll reserve a table for us at the Miami Restaurant. At least it's got an association with my home state, and I'd appreciate that, tonight. This may be a special occasion."

Laura told herself in awe that he meant to propose marriage tonight, after all. She realized, however, that he was standing patiently and looking at her in an awkward way, as if he felt embarrassed.

Carefully he asked, "Can I use your phone?"

"Of course."

After he had left the kitchen, she realized that he'd been hesitating to ask her permission because Laura's phone was located in her bedroom. He was shyness incarnate, it seemed, even though he had made at least two furious rushes at Rochelle Stoddard tonight. Laura felt convinced that no matter how long she might live, she'd never be able to understand what made a man tick.

The Miami Restaurant was crowded in spite of the

late hour, as Felix had anticipated. He and Laura were taken to a table close to the kitchen, and they took it because there was no choice. Felix muttered under his breath as he sat down, but then shrugged and asked Laura to talk about herself; he added that he didn't know as much of Laura's upbringing as he'd like to.

Laura told him what it had been like to be raised in a succession of foster homes before her parents had died, and of taking on a stage career as a way (she supposed) of attracting some attention to herself: a way of showing off in front of all her foster parents.

Felix asked, "Is this the kind of work you expect to keep on doing indefinitely?"

"I doubt if acting is an older woman's profession, by and large. It's the sort of career a girl goes into on the assumption that she won't have to worry for too long about working; that some man will marry her and take that particular problem off her shoulders."

He was going to make a remark, but the bus boy picked that special moment to remove the soup plates. Felix talked casually about the design of the restaurant, and it led him into telling her about architecture. Over the past few months, he had been teaching Laura the joys of looking at a building for its own sake, and both his diffidence and his anger vanished when he talked about the subject.

He was telling her how he would recast the cavernous restaurant if he were designing it, when he glanced toward the kitchen and suddenly growled:

"I hope the main dish will be a hell of a lot better than the soup."

"I expect it will," Laura said soothingly.

The waiter arrived with a cheerful apology for having taken such a long time about the service. He was bald, and his uniform looked immaculate.

Felix took a bite of the meat and promptly spat it out. The waiter looked patiently at Felix, who tapped a hard hand against the cloth-covered tabletop.

"This is burnt," he said finally. "I ordered it rare."

"Would you like me to take it back, sir?"

"Of course. I'm not going to—never mind. Take it back."

When the waiter was gone again, Felix said, "It's like eating in one of those motels that have sprung up in Florida like a plague. But I swear that not one of those cheap tinhorn nature-destroyers is going to be put up in El Norte. Not one."

"Is El Norte in Florida, too?"

"It's a strip of coastline and absolutely glorious," he said. "My mother, my half-brother, and I have been there for as long as I can remember, and I'm sure that as soon as you—"

The waiter now returned with the rare steak, and made a point of standing at the table until Felix had tasted it and admitted that it was now fit to eat.

He cleared his throat when the waiter had moved on, and said haltingly, "I was going to say that as soon as you—ah—can visit the place you'll see why I like it so much."

Laura knew perfectly well that he had actually wanted to say, if it had not been for the night's succession of unlucky accidents, but she hoped her disappointment didn't show.

Felix leaned forward earnestly. "Listen here, Laura, do you know what we could do? My job in New York is over, and the building will be ready for occupancy on Friday, so the two of us could fly out to El Norte. You'd be there for the weekend, chaperoned by my mother, and you could leave on Sunday night. How's that? Will you be my guest?"

"I—why, yes, I'd be happy to spend a few days out there," she said, calmly accepting this postponement of his marriage offer.

"Good, Laura, I'm very glad." He swallowed part of the coffee and made a face. "Let me take you to a quiet little espresso place where the coffee is good and the waiter brings what you ask for."

But she noticed that he left exactly twenty percent of the check total as his tip. For the second time in a

very few hours, Laura felt despairingly certain that never in her life would she be able to understand the workings of a man's mind.

It was odd, in retrospect, that she had no feeling at all of a presence close to her—calmly, inexorably waiting.

TWO

Two women in their thirties were coming towards Laura.

It was Thursday night. Department stores would be open till nine, and it would have been flouting feminine nature for Laura not to buy at least one item of clothing for the week-end trip. She rushed out to Golden's Store as soon as the day's rehearsals were finished.

Gravely, she inspected the bikini bathing suits and the newer models toped with fish netting. Some suits came with jewelled, lacelike tops. Having visualized herself excitingly dressed in each of the items before her, Laura decided to buy a one-piece navy blue suit with a light blue V-stripe, coming to a base just below the breast line. She needed a sturdy suit to be worn both in the water and out of it—unlike the blondes whose skins start to peel furiously as soon as they walk into the sunlight and never go near the water at all.

The two women rushed towards Laura as soon as she had finished paying for the suit. The red-haired girl looked familiar, but Laura couldn't remember any details about the time or place where they had met. She was conservatively dressed, with the right lipstick, but the wrong shade of face powder. Her voice was deep and trained, but too loud.

"Laura, isn't it?" she asked in the tones of a hunter signalling the sight of a fox. "Laura Foster? Rochelle's friend?"

"Why, yes, that's right."

"You two are rehearsing *Mary Dugan* now, from what Rochelle says. Heaven alone knows what schlock plays these off-Broadway people will put on and expect an audience to overpay for. I'm Harriet and this is Evelyn."

Laura responded politely, but glanced at the aisle leading to the door.

"I've been talking to Rochelle, and she says that you've just about landed yourself a rich fish."

"There's nothing defi—"

"A rich marriage would certainly give you a base to operate from," Harriet said, adding carefully: "The marriage plans are practically all set up, aren't they?"

"Nothing has been decided yet." The girls seemed soothed to hear it, in spite of their sympathetic comments, so Laura added lightly, "I'm going upstairs to look at furniture while I'm here."

"Let's all go," Harriet said agreeably. "It's a kick I haven't tried for a long time."

The two girls chattered to each other, while Laura acted as if she was deeply absorbed by the display of furniture in the Louis XIII style. Laura stepped into a bedroom display, complete with a low ceiling of wooden beams, a fireplace, two shallow chairs, and a canopy bed.

Evelyn, Harriet's friend, said somberly, "I'd hate having to clean all this."

Harriet was taking another point of view about the furnishings. "A fifth of whiskey could roll onto that bed and not be discovered for six months. Come to think of it, I don't suppose they had any bars in Louis the Thirteenth's day."

Evelyn said mildly, "I don't suppose they went to parties every day or night, either."

"Well, I don't spend *all* my time at—oh, that reminds me. Laura, I hear from Rochelle that you'll be going to this fellow's place for the weekend. Isn't that true?"

"Yes," Laura admitted after a split-second's holding her breath. "His mother and his half-brother will be there, too."

Evelyn put in, "Ask your boy friend if he's got some rich friends for us."

"Well, I certainly wish you all the luck in the world, Laura dear, and I hope the two of you run away to Alabama or somewhere and get married before the week is over." Harriet smiled brightly. "And you know what a bunch of us ought to do? Give you two kids a real send-off."

Laura's attention was caught. "I appreciate it, but I don't think it's necessary."

Evelyn said lightly, "Harriet here would throw a party for any reason at all."

"Thanks very much, dear," Harriet snapped. "But I mean it, Laura. We can meet at the airport (Rochelle is sure to know where and when) with baskets of fruit and liquor and heaven knows what else. Very cheerful, and it wouldn't take you or your boy friend out of the way at all."

"I doubt if Felix enjoys that sort of thing," Laura began. She had drifted into a reproduction of a library in Louis XIII style, filled with ornate shelves; low-slung chairs whose upholstery was edged with fringes that came down to shiny, rounded legs; and a coal-black table, set against the far wall.

Evelyn, who seemed to be more of the home-conscious type than her friend, looked around the room and sniffed. "Too much junk."

"I like it," Laura said truthfully, leaping at the change of subject. "There's a feeling of permanence to it, as if it's been there for years and will last forever."

Harriet, though, wouldn't be swerved from talking about a party. "As far as that send-off for you and your boy friend is concerned, believe me, it'll be no trouble for any of us. I've got some girl friends who'll be glad to make the scene—as they say on Park Avenue—and I'm sure you and Rochelle have got plenty of friends in common. From what Rochelle told me, she

might arrange to miss the bash herself, but that's up to Rochelle. What do you say?"

"I hope she'll come," Laura began, but added, "if there *is* a party. I don't really think it's necessary, Harriet, but I'm glad you thought of it."

"We're doing this for ourselves," Harriet grinned. "After you and your boy friend get on the plane, the rest of us will go to a bar or somebody's apartment and keep on celebrating. It'll be like a national holiday."

"As soon as I ask Felix what he thinks of the idea," Laura said soothingly, "I'll let Rochelle know."

"Well, if I don't find out right away I'll have made other plans for Friday by the time I hear from Rochelle. All you have to do, Laura, is tell your boy friend that the two of you are having a send-off party on Friday evening at the airport."

"If there were any phones here I'd do it this minute, but there aren't any."

"Next to the elevators," the practical-minded Evelyn said. "I noticed them as soon as we came up."

Laura had been fingering a seventeenth-century globe on one of the wooden tables, but she turned and kept from sighing aloud. Harriet led the way through the crowded store to the elevators and the bank of phones. Laura got through to the hotel where Felix was staying. He cleared his throat a couple of times after he picked up the receiver in his room.

"Laura?" he asked mildly, his voice thinned and flattened by the wire.

"Felix, I've just run into some friends of a friend, and they've gotten it into their heads to give us a send-off party at Kennedy Airport. I hope you don't mind."

There was a perceptible pause before he said, "N-no, of course not, if you think you'd enjoy it. Tell those people that we appreciate the idea very much."

"I'll do that, Felix. And thank you."

"There's nothing to thank me for," he said earnestly. "Will I see you for dinner?"

"I expect to be over at your hotel in half an hour, at the most."

"Fine."

They said so long, and Laura opened the booth. Department store noises swarmed around her as she stepped out. Harriet leaned forward eagerly.

"Felix says that we'll be delighted," Laura told the girls. "We're leaving at four thirty on the United flight out of Kennedy."

"We'll be there at four," Harriet said easily, "with lots of drinkers. It's a shame you're not going by boat so we could have a send-off from your stateroom, but I suppose that Kennedy Airport crawls with bars."

Her friend, Evelyn, said severely, "If we're going out to this other party tonight, Harriet, we'd better get a move-on."

"Yes, of course, of course," Harriet agreed. "Well, Laura, goodbye till tomorrow. I'm really looking forward to meeting this fellow of yours. From what Rochelle told me, he's awfully exciting."

Felix phoned her on Friday just before the lunch break at rehearsal. He sounded as if he were in a hurry.

"Are you packed, Laura?" he asked. "You told me last night that you'd do it when you got home."

"Of course I'm packed. I even left my suitcase in a locker at the Port Authority building before I went to work this morning. I told you I'd do that, too."

"That's true, Laura, I knew I could depend on you." He paused again. "Are they going to need you this afternoon at the rehearsal?"

"I suppose so. Why?"

"Can't you get off a few hours earlier?"

"Rehearsing a play isn't like a nine-to-five job, Felix. Why do you want to lure me away from it?"

"To tell you the truth, Laura, I called the airport today about something else entirely, and while I was at it, I found out that we could get reservations on an earlier plane."

"Earlier? But what about—?"

"What about the send-off party, you were going to say? Why, Laura, I suppose we'd have to take a rain check and put it off to some other time, when we can make a full-scale night of entertainment out of it, instead."

"If you didn't want to go through with it, you should have told me last night, and I'd have stopped them. But as it is, Felix, I think we ought to go through with the darn thing."

"All we have to do is leave them a note at the reception desk," Felix said. "They'll go off to drink someplace else and be perfectly happy. They're just using us as an excuse to get disgustingly drunk."

"Felix, if your heart is set on our leaving earlier, then that's what we'll do."

"Good, Laura. I'm very glad."

"But I only wish you had told me before this, what was on your mind. I hate the idea of not having been completely honest about the send-off."

"I'll see you at one-thirty, Laura."

When she put the phone back in place shortly afterwards, Laura sighed. There was a difference between shyness and behaving like some sort of a fugitive from justice; although she was quite sure he wasn't hiding from the law. In a few years' time, perhaps, he would behave differently. After all, marriage (and she had no doubt that the two of them were going to be married) did change people.

She went back into the rehearsal hall and told the director, "Something important has come up, Bill. I can't stay for the afternoon."

The director shrugged. "Well, good luck, kid, and take care of yourself."

She glanced from the director to her friend Rochelle, and back again. "Do you mean anything special by that?"

"I just don't want anything happening to you till after we're open," the director said patiently. "I never know what kind of trouble a young kid like you can get

into. You're the sort of girl who adopts stray cats and lame dogs; those are the innocent-bystander types who walk into a bad jam and then can't figure out why they're the only ones who get hurt. So, like I say, Laura, take care of yourself."

THREE

LAURA FELT uncomfortable as soon as she stepped off the plane in mid-afternoon, Florida time. Felix, darkly handsome in a white suit, had gone off to charter a cab and telephone his relatives that he and Laura had arrived safely. She was watching people walk back and forth along the glazed floor in the airport building when she realized what had made her so unhappy: a feeling of disloyalty to her friends in New York. For her to be in the warm sun during January, while the others were trapped in the throes of a New York winter, had a certain indecency in it. And she told herself ruefully that a short weekend in this climate could bring on a stiff cold when she went back to her wintry home.

Felix appeared at the end of the long, lighted room, a hand raised for her to follow him. She did, and found herself in the back seat of a wide, comfortable cab.

Felix looked out the window for some five minutes after the cab was under way. Laura caught part of his fierce muttered comment:

". . . every damn week."

"Excuse me?"

"I said that I think there must be more of *those* in the area every damn week."

Laura looked past his pointing finger. A huge advertising signboard blocked out part of a hilly view, and a motel done in pink stucco darted past. There was a restaurant, a souvenir shop, a gas station, and a diner that advertised what were called "Floridaburgers."

"People do everything they can in order to pollute God's work," Felix said. "Why on earth can't a bunch of these things be put into one separate enclave and the rest of the area be left alone?"

"I suppose because it isn't businesslike."

"And damn few people care enough about it to fight." He struck his kneecaps with clenched fists. "Well, *I* care enough. My family has lived in the El Norte section since the Civil War, and I'm not going to see it befouled like so much of the rest of this country."

The driver, a thick-necked man in a white cap, suddenly snickered.

Felix, his eyes narrowing, glared at what was visible of the man's back. "Do you think I'm wrong, driver?"

"No, it isn't that." The driver spoke in a subdued voice that wasn't far from being a whisper. His suntanned hands rested lightly but firmly on the bone-white wheel. "I'm sure you'll do the best you can to keep the carnival hucksters from coming into El Norte and dirtying it up."

"But you think I won't be able to prevent it, is that your point?"

"Well, mister, look at it like this. El Norte has got plenty of rich people living on it, or else it'd already have been sliced up like a melon. Just the same, it covers about a hundred and fifty miles of coastline. You don't suppose that the cheap operators are gonna let it pass by, mister, now do you?"

"El Norte will fight those hucksters in every court there is, and start up some lynching parties afterwards."

"I don't think you'll win. The cheapies have got all the time in the world, and you residents can't always keep up the same pitch of anger or pride. Do you see what I mean?"

"You're wrong." There was a gray-white line around Felix's mouth; he was simply not able to argue a point he felt so strongly was the correct one.

The driver said, "Well, it's probably been a little

while since you came hereabouts, hasn't it? A couple months, maybe, mister?"

Felix was now so rigid that Laura put out a hand to restrain him from leaning closer to the driver. Felix gave no indication that he noticed it.

"What about that? Why are you asking how long I've been away?"

"Because in the last couple of months—oh, oh! We're getting to the El Norte section, and I'd better start to drive real careful."

"What's been happening in the last few months?" Felix asked huskily.

There was no answer. Felix smacked a palm flush against the shoulder of the front seat. The driver, startled into a curse, lost control for a moment. The cab swayed briefly as it started the rise along a mountain line.

It was Laura's first sight of the El Norte country, and for the first time she understood how Felix felt about preserving it. She saw a swatch of clean blue sky against an earthen cliff. There were trees, and a long narrow patch of grass beside each tree. The ocean pounded against the earth below. Laura opened her window to smell the air, and realized that she had never known a sensation at all like it. The air smelled as if it were made of champagne.

"Felix," she said quietly, "this is wonderful, just wonderful. I know exactly what you mean, now."

He hadn't been listening. All his energies were concentrated on the driver's face as seen through the overhead mirror. He spoke clearly and carefully just before the cab reached a level stretch of road:

"I want to know what you're hinting at about El Norte."

"Why, it's really a lot more simple than you'd think," the driver said after a pause. "There's a proposition up before the State Highway Commission to—here we are!"

Laura was concentrated entirely on Felix, who sat

waiting with an ear actually cupped to hear the news more clearly. His lips moved, but no words came out.

A wooden door opened and closed with a sense of urgency. From the corners of her eyes Laura could see a heavy, dark-featured man stepping out of a timbered white house. He suddenly waved both hands to accent his closeness to the cab and then ran toward it.

"What about the Highway Commission?" Felix asked, and his very mildness was dangerous. "Do they want to put new roads through El Norte?"

"No new roads," the driver assured him quickly. "But it's pretty near as bad, if you ask me. They're planning to—"

"Felix, Felix!" the newcomer called out. Laura was reminded, against her will, of a small child, welcoming an adult and wondering how valuable a toy has been brought as a gift.

The newcomer bent over, his eyes gleaming with warmth and friendliness. Seen close up, he looked older than Felix, and the sharp features that had made one face so interesting to Laura seemed to have blurred and softened in this other man. He wasn't more than thirty-five years old. A smile tugged at the corners of his full, weak lips.

Felix raised a hand to keep his half-brother (the newcomer couldn't have been anyone else in the world) from interrupting.

"The Highway Commission is considering plans," the driver said finally when he saw that Felix hadn't moved, "to make the three-lane highway through the region, Florida Three, a lot wider. That means much more traffic is expected, of course, and it's the beginning of the end for El Norte."

Felix whirled on his half-brother. "Is anybody doing something about this?"

Harvey shrugged elaborately and said, "I just came out to get the bags."

Felix muttered, "I'll find out," and opened the cab door so swiftly that he almost knocked his half-brother down. Without bothering to apologize he ran up the

white wooden porch. He opened the door so violently that one of the green shutters drifted loose and swayed back and forth in a semicircle.

The house, now that Laura was given a chance to look at it, turned out to be a two-story affair with a wide balcony across the second floor. It had an air of having been lived in for many years, and it would have surprised her to find any signs of modernity on the inside at all.

But she found them, of course. Walking in ahead of the hard-breathing Harvey who was laboring from the weight of two luggage pieces, Laura was in a comfortably set up hallway. There were half a dozen chairs; a full-size, but narrow, mirror; and a pair of husband-and-wife portraits, made some years ago, which faced each other across a stairway.

In back of her, Laura heard a thump, as one of the luggage pieces smacked against the floor. She turned to check that neither bag had been shattered in half and tried to make herself feel as much confidence about their insides.

"Where is Felix?" she asked promptly.

Harvey's sunny smile widened and he pointed to the far end of the hall. The door was half-open. Laura could see Felix sitting in back of a brown desk with a Chinese terra cotta sculpture and several sheets of paper crammed against one corner of a green pad. He spoke quickly into the phone receiver, his head rigid, and listened, as he usually did over the phone, with his head cocked to the right.

"Very important," Harvey said, shrugging in what appeared to be unconquerable good nature. "Felix is afraid somebody's going to put up skyscrapers across the canyon, or something."

Laura suggested mildly, "You'd better not let Felix hear you making fun of him about that."

"I'd get my head handed to me." Harvey covered his lips with a palm and giggled silently, rocking back and forth.

Laura didn't know whether or not it was fear she

felt at the sight of a grown man carrying on like a child, but she could not make herself keep looking. She turned toward the mirror, busying herself with slight repairs to her blonde tresses. She was alert, though, for any disturbance from the study where Felix was telephoning.

"If you can tell me where I'm staying, Harvey, I'll go up there and get a few of the kinks out of myself."

"Staying? Oh yes, mother mentioned that."

"My name is Laura Foster."

"Mother told me that, too," Harvey said, pleased at this example of his mother's foresight. "She told me that a Miss Laura Foster would be here for a little while and she herself, mother, would make the arrangements."

"Where is your mother, then?"

"Ah, that's the whole point." Harvey bent toward Laura and stage-whispered, "She's gone."

"Didn't she tell you which room I'm to stay in?"

"Not a word," Harvey said regretfully. "Mother doesn't like you, I'm afraid."

From a short distance away, over the noise of Harvey's feet shuing awkwardly along the floor and of Felix dialing another phone number, Laura heard the tip of a cane strike the floor in what sounded like repressed fury.

"So your mother has left the house?" Laura probed. "Didn't she even want to stay here long enough to see how I react to the news that she isn't available?"

"Well, she—she had to go."

"And of course she couldn't be in earshot.—Right?"

"She told me to tell you she was gone." Harvey's voice soared with discomfort. "I'm sure she'll pick out a room for you, later on."

"In that case I'll have to change my clothes right here," Laura said evenly. "If it were not for my wanting to look well and make Felix happy that way, I wouldn't dream of changing my clothes right here and now."

Harvey's eyes bulged. "You can't do that!"

Two interruptions took place at almost the same time. In the library, Felix slammed the receiver down against its cradle; and to Laura's right, from back of a closed double door, the tip of a cane struck hard again at the floor.

One of the double doors opened on a flinty-eyed woman in her mid-fifties. The resemblance to Felix, except for the curled gray hair and the fine spiderweb of lines around her eyes, would have been uncanny in a woman not related to him.

"So," she said in a voice that was almost as deep as Felix's. "You've caused enough trouble in this house already, young woman."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Indeed. Then come into this room and see it for yourself."

Mrs. Page didn't gesture, but turned around and walked away. Laura, her brows knitted in perplexity, followed.

Laura found herself in the sort of room that could only be called a salon. The furniture was French baroque; the mirrors were Chippendale, with fine gold scrollwork around them. The walls were covered in green velvet. Laura recognized a Degas and a Monet on the walls, and not for a moment did she doubt that they were originals.

The cocktail table in the middle of this room was almost hidden by two bunches of lilacs in cellophane. Two more flower packages had been put down on the floor underneath. It was to the flowers that Mrs. Page was pointing severely.

"I mean those," she snapped. "They've been coming in all day, and I won't have it any longer."

"I'm sure they were sent by the people who were supposed to meet Felix and me at Kennedy Airport in New York," Laura said. "I'm sure they're intended for Felix as much as for me."

"They have to be thrown out," Mrs. Page said briskly, in a tone that apparently closed all argument. "I won't have them in my house."

"Those flowers were sent by people I know," Laura replied, choosing her words with care, "and I plan to keep them for as long as I possibly can."

"We'll see about that."

There was a green-fringed bellpull at one side of the lavish artificial fireplace. Mrs. Page, the cane fixed firmly in her left hand, advanced toward it to signal for a servant.

Felix cut in:

"What's going on between you two?"

He was standing in the opened door, almost as stiffly as a soldier on parade. There was a thin, angry line on each of his cheeks, probably from recollections of the phone conversations he'd been having.

"Nothing's going on at all," Mrs. Page said, tugging sharply at the bellpull before she turned to look at her son. "Just a little misunderstanding, dear, but I'll set everything right. Did you have a good trip?"

"Fair," he said quickly, and gave one of his most engaging smiles. "But I brought Laura back with me, and that alone makes up for any trouble I've been having lately. I'm sure that the two of you are going to get along fine."

Looking at his shy grin, Laura was able to understand, for once in her life, the sort of mood in which a person was likely to resort to violence because it was so difficult to say what was necessary.

"Your young friend," Mrs. Page remarked in measured tones, "already received these *things* before she even arrived here. Obviously Miss—ah, Chester, is a very popular young lady—in some circles."

Felix turned to Laura, hesitating to ask the question that was obviously on his mind.

"It looks as if your mother and I have started on the wrong foot," Laura said as evenly as she could. "I'm willing to take the flowers to my room, and that ought to solve one problem at least."

"I've got an allergy to flowers." Mrs. Page, her lips hard at the corners and her eyes narrowed to a steely

glare, didn't look as if she'd ever known a split-second's weakness in her life. "Doctor Passy told me so just recently, and I know I couldn't stand to think that there were any flowers in this house."

The thin, angry red lines of Felix's cheeks suddenly pulsed and glowed.

Behind him, a woman's quiet voice asked deferentially, "Did somebody ring?"

Felix stepped into the salon and to one side. A maid stood in the doorway now, a woman in her mid-forties. She looked attentive, but very much at ease.

"I did, Susan," Mrs. Page said, and gestured toward the cocktail table. "Take those out of here, and give them to a sick friend of yours. Or to some charity, if you'd rather do that."

With an air of satisfaction, Mrs. Page glanced at Laura. And a coiffed gray curl suddenly dropped across Mrs. Page's right eye as her head was pulled back in stunned surprise.

Laura had walked over to the cocktail table and picked up one of the bunches of cellophane-wrapped lilacs.

"I'll take these upstairs to my room," she said, and promptly turned her back on Mrs. Page. The older woman's cane tap-tapped on the floor some half a dozen times before she made any remark.

"There have been members of the Page family living in this house since the Civil War," Mrs. Page said to Laura's back, "and we aren't used to being irritated in our own house by any stranger who happens to come for a visit."

Laura, though her nerves were as taut as violin strings, made a point of turning around politely and smiling, before she said:

"We may get to know each other so well that I won't be a stranger at all."

Laura had one satisfying glimpse of Mrs. Page's face whitening with anger as she understood what was behind Laura's words. She looked at her son, as if

asking herself whether he would marry this stranger against her own clear wishes. She glared back at Laura again when the girl spoke directly to her.

"Please ask your maid to show me up to my room," Laura said calmly, "so that I can take a nap, at least, before dinner."

Laura didn't complain about having been placed for the weekend in a distant room in the second wing of the house; she wouldn't cause any more trouble than necessary, of course, for Felix's sake. She was settling herself for an afternoon nap on the round bed in the room, when there was a soft knock at the door. Laura drew on her robe—the luggage had been brought upstairs by the gardener-handyman—and asked who was knocking.

"Me," Felix answered quietly. "Can I talk to you for a couple of minutes?"

He sat on the one soft chair in the room and looked admiringly at Laura for a minute or so before he told her what was on his mind. It seemed that he wanted to apologize for his mother's bad manners.

"She's used to having her way," he explained, "and the gout that makes her use a cane wouldn't do a thing to help anybody's disposition."

"I'm sure that your mother and I will get accustomed to each other in time," Laura said soothingly. "Don't worry about it, Felix. Above all, don't let yourself get upset."

"Mother always thought that the only girl I'd ever show a serious interest in is one of the locals. A nice girl from a good family and all that. Mother even picked out the girl and couldn't understand why I was hesitating."

"She'll get over her resentment, I'm sure."

"You certainly declared war downstairs when you took those flowers." He smiled ruefully. "I guess that mother likes a good fight now and then. But she may have a lot more on her hands in a few months than even she can take care of."

"What do you mean?"

"The hucksters really *are* closing in on El Norte." Felix was tight-lipped now. He stood up and began pacing the room to work off additional energy.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course. This isn't the vacation season, for example, but we still get close to eight thousand cars passing the roads on a Sunday. Last summer, in fact, El Norte State Park turned away hundreds of people every week because there was no camping facilities to take care of them."

"What does that have to do with the motel owners and other people like that?"

"When the tourists come, the leeches can't be far behind," Felix said, throwing the words over a shoulder as he paced the room. "Why do you suppose plans are being made to widen the highway? So that more cars can come in. Oh, the hucksters are on to El Norte, all right; make no mistake about that."

"You can't keep people out," Laura said reasonably.

"We're not trying to," Felix pointed out with more patience than she might have expected. "Our hope is to keep El Norte from being part of a motel complex, to keep a little beauty in this world, a little place where you can go and feel closer to—well, to God. This is a crusade on my part, Laura: nothing less than a crusade."

"What do you plan to do about it?"

"I'm going to attend a meeting tonight—I hope you'll come with me—and maybe we can get rolling on plans to save El Norte. I don't want to find out when it's too late that somebody is putting up a gas station across the canyon from Coralton."

"From where?"

"Didn't I tell you that the name of this house is Coralton? No, I suppose I didn't. So many things have been happening that you can't blame me for not having remembered."

"Felix, I don't blame you for anything," she said quietly.

He probably didn't hear the affection in her voice;

he couldn't pull his mind away from what was, to him, the biggest problem of them all.

"I hope you don't think that everybody in El Norte is on my side, Laura. Rich people live around here, you know, and if there's more money in selling out to the hucksters, a lot of them will want to do it. The rich live in a very simple world, when everything is said and done."

"You'll persuade them to do what's right," Laura said calmly. "I know you will."

"I get too excited in an argument and lose my self-control." He set his jaw tightly. "I wish that somebody who's better at persuasion would take care of that side of it. I feel a lot happier if I don't have to argue with my neighbors."

"Are you sure, Felix, that the over-all situation is as bad as you think it is?"

"It's worse," he said brusquely, then gave an apologetic little smile and explained himself. "I found out over the phone that the Highway Commission is out to revamp El Norte and cut out what it calls 'danger spots.'—They'll nibble away at more and more of the land until there'll be nothing left at all. Well, it's not going to happen here. I'll fight my neighbors, the State Commission, and the whole world, if I have to, Laura, but the hucksters aren't going to get their dirty hands on El Norte. I don't care what I have to do to make sure El Norte stays like it is; but that's what I'll do."

His fists opened partway and formed a rough circle, as if he were getting ready to wring somebody's neck in vicious anger. But he suddenly whirled around and left the room, slamming the door behind him. At first, his steps sounded like a rapid tattoo of drumbeats along the hall, but they became softer in a little while, and there were longer intervals between succeeding steps, until they couldn't be heard any more from Laura's room.

She realized that the tension in him had been dissipated for now and hoped that dinner wouldn't be too difficult a time, between herself and Mrs. Page, in what

Laura considered as the struggle over Felix. In a short time, Laura had drifted off to sleep. . . .

She was the center of all eyes at her coming-out party, except that her wealthy parents were quarreling between themselves. When her father, a sharp-featured man who slightly resembled Felix, forgot to dance with her, Laura reminded him, and he became angry about it. He pulled her to the floor and gripped her at the waist. The pressure grew more heavy. She was losing her balance now, and her eyes swayed from one gaudy dress to another. An admiring pair of eyes, very close, was at the point of jabbing into her as sharply as her father's hand. What was the man doing to her? Wasn't he her father? Wasn't it true that she'd always lived with her parents during their lifetime, instead of using up her childhood in one strange home after another? That she had always known security, warmth, and the happiness of being loved and cheri . . .

She was crying bitterly when she woke up.

FOUR

LAURA WAS feeling at ease when she walked into the salon just before dinner. The jungle of French baroque was now at least reasonably familiar to her, and it had been in place for a long time. Permanence gave considerable charm even to garishness, at least in Laura's frightened eyes.

Mrs. Page had been standing like a sentinel near the middle of the room, blocking out the cocktail table and chairs near it. She wore a white and navy blue dress, styled perhaps ten years ago, as if she didn't care about more recent trends. The light from the artificial fireplace caught her gray hair and made it gleam silkily.

Felix came into the room shortly afterwards. Mrs. Page smiled at him, took a firm grip on the handle of her cane, and walked three steps to her right.

"See who's here, Felix?" she asked, gesturing with her free hand toward the soft chairs. "Aren't you glad to see her?"

Felix gasped, and the newcomer's soft and husky voice put in agreeably, "How've you been, Felix? I hope your time in New York was very pleasant."

"Yes, it was," Felix said, his self-control returning slowly. "I'd like you two girls to meet: Laura, this is Janice. She's one of the neighbors, Janice is."

"How do you do?" Janice said with cool unconcern. She smiled brightly at Felix. "I hope that your nerves are pretty well rested by now."

"They had been," Felix said, "till I heard about the Highway Commission's plans to destroy El Norte."

"And now you feel like dropping somebody from a high place, I suppose," Janice said as if referring to an amusing quirk of character. "You were always impulsive."

She glanced directly at Laura, and the true meaning of her remark became clear: "Bringing an outsider like this girl to the house called Coralton," was an act of impulse.

Laura returned the glance with interest. The girl, Janice, was of medium height and probably not much older than Laura. Her hair was red and lustrous; her skin soft and glowing; her figure developed with patient and loving and expensive care; her legs long and tapering. Wealth had given her a poise which wasn't far short of arrogance.

Felix had caught the exact shade of meaning in the red-haired girl's most recent comment. He said, "I'm not really impulsive, Janice. I always know exactly what I wait."

He made a point of smiling at Laura, and she smiled warmly up at him. Janice sat back serenely as if no thrust had been made at her; probably it wouldn't occur to her so soon that Felix seriously preferred Laura to a beautiful and wealthy long-time friend.

"The point is," Janice murmured, "for you to decide whether what you want is the right thing for you to have."

A pulse in Felix's left temple was hammering furiously. Laura folded a hand into his and felt him hold her tightly at first and then more loosely as he grew calm.

The door suddenly opened on Harvey. Felix's half-brother had dressed quickly for dinner and one of the buttons of his collar was undone. The smile of blank good will that he showed everybody might have been engraved on his thick, red lips.

"Hello Felix, hello, uh, Miss Foster, hello mother, and—why, hello Janice. Long time no see."

"Thank you, Harvey," Janice said regally, hiding her annoyance that *the* welcome had been given to her by the wrong man.

Mrs. Page waited for no more small talk. "Now that we're all here," she said, "we can have dinner. Felix," she added, turning to Janice, "will you take our guest into the dining room? Thank you, dear, I know you don't mind being with one of the best friends you've had since you were a child. And you know as well as I do that Janice has grown into a lovely young woman." . . .

"I invited Janice to have dinner with us," Mrs. Page said from her place at the head of the sixteenth-century refectory table in the dining room, "because I think it's high time that you, my sweet,"—she turned again to Janice—"and Felix started to plan for the future."

Felix was sitting beside Janice, where his mother had autocratically put him. He faced his half-brother, who was sitting placidly next to Laura.

It was Harvey, of course, who tried to behave as if nothing disturbing had been said.

"I'm sure Janice will have a very good future," he smiled. "Any member of the Ulric family—a female, I mean—can expect marriage and children and everything that goes with it."

"A good marriage is exactly what I want to talk about," Mrs. Page said firmly. "I realize that it may involve treading on a few toes at this moment, but the matter is far too important to put it off any longer. It's been understood for years that Janice and Felix would marry, and I think it's about time that the two of you began to make arrangements for going through with it."

Laura, listening to the strong-minded older woman, realized that Felix was being forced into a position where he'd have to fight against her will entirely by himself. He sat glaring at his mother in silence. In back of him, and at his right against the wall, a Vermeer painting showed a sweet-faced nun, who appeared to

be looking at the scene with an amused smile on her cherubic face.

Finally, Felix said, "I don't want to go into it."

"Excuse me, Felix dear? What did you say?"

"I don't want to talk about it now."

"Both of you put matters off a few months ago when you, Felix, left El Norte. Now it's time to begin making plans."

Janice said, "There was no choice when we had to delay the marriage before, but I don't think it's unfair to talk about the situation now. This is as good a time and place as any other."

"Are you both blind as well as mean?" Felix's voice was rising. "Laura is in this room, and *she's* the one I've made up my mind to—"

Mrs. Page interrupted briskly, "Don't say anything you'll be sorry for."

Harvey, who would probably have been oblivious to the crackling of barbed wire, turned to Laura and said pleasantly, "It's amazing that Janice would want to marry into the Page family, considering how much she knows about us."

Mrs. Page said frostily, "Whatever you're talking about, Harvey, is not important. Stop it."

"I was only going to say that the Pages are a difficult family," Harvey offered with his usual smile. "After all, Felix has a bad temper that gets him into trouble, and I'm El Norte's idea of a village idiot. For Janice to marry in, so to speak, takes guts. Or, if you prefer, intestinal fortitude."

At any other time, it would have been pleasant for Laura to see Mrs. Page make a flustered motion that nearly swept her three-quarter-full soup bowl off the table.

"Harvey, stop this immediately!" she commanded.

"I'm serious," Harvey said, but the smile didn't leave his lips. "My hat is off to Janice for wanting to have a brother-in-law who's never held a job and who won't ride in an automobile since a traffic accident nearly fifteen years ago——well, I spent seven months

in the hospital afterwards, and I still have to take treatments, occasionally. It's a lucky thing I've got two incomes: you know, one from my father's estate, and one from mother's second husband.—He adopted me, and I took the name of Page.—As I say, Janice knows she'll be letting herself in for some difficult situations socially, but she's still willing to marry into the tribe; and my hat's off to her."

"Leave this table," Mrs. Page shouted, all dignity gone at last. "Leave this table at once."

Harvey looked disappointed. He got up slowly, and nodded at Laura. His good-byes to the others were exactly the same, as if he were going away from the table of his own free will. He tried to shake Janice Ulric's hand, though, anxious to give her another expression of what was apparently sincere admiration; Janice turned away from Harvey as if he didn't exist. Harvey saluted his mother cheerfully and walked out, whistling under his breath.

"I hope that the two of you would like to have a June wedding," Mrs. Page said when Harvey had left the dining room. "But you've waited so long that perhaps you'd like something to take place earlier than that."

For the first time, Felix allowed himself to look at Laura. "You know, Laura, I like Janice because I've known her for such a long time; but I don't want to marry her."

Mrs. Page said briskly, "I think I deserve the courtesy of being spoken to, Felix. I suppose you're under a strain, in general, but you'll change—"

"The way I feel won't change," he snapped. "I'm not the same man I was a few months ago, and I haven't got the same feelings. I'm afraid you've brought Janice here under false pretenses."

Mrs. Page tapped the refectory table slowly with the crook of her cane. "I'm willing to overlook that outburst as I've done so often in the past.—Motherlove, Janice, consists of overlooking or ignoring ingratitude from your offspring."

Felix said, "My mind is made up."

Janice Ulric had sat nearly motionless since Harvey's eerie confession of his mental imbalance. Now she turned to Felix and smiled thinly.

"I suppose you've decided to marry some out-of-town fortune hunter," she said, almost as if referring to a person who wasn't in the room with them. "I'm sure it'll be a good marriage if the girl can get used to your awful temper, Felix, and if you tell her about yourself before she says 'I do.' If you tell her *all* about yourself."

Felix winced. Laura promptly stood up and circled the table on her way to the door. He was at her side before she had taken a dozen steps. They had agreed in advance on leaving the table together, and Laura didn't want him to lose his temper with those two women completely.

In back of them was Janice Ulric's calm voice, inflected by sadism:

"You mustn't forget to be as honest as Harvey would be—he put the idea into my head just now, I'll admit—and tell the girl that you had to leave El Norte—"

"Keep walking," Felix whispered.

"—because you murdered a man with your bare hands," Janice Ulric finished.

Laura's steps didn't falter, and Felix remained at her side.

"And if you can murder one human being," Janice added just before the door was closed on her, "you just possibly—for all I know—might—"

Laura's heart was pounding so noisily that she couldn't hear her footsteps, and when she tried to look down she didn't see what was ahead of her. Vaguely she was aware of being taken to a car with seats so large that her feet didn't touch the carpeted floor when she sat back. The car swerved after Felix started it, and Laura was able to look in back of her at that hostile place where other women unsheathed their knives to use

them against her. She would never feel at home in Coralton, any more than she had at one of the numerous girls' schools or lodging houses she had known in the past.

The car reached part of the highway known as Florida 3. Stars winked and glittered near the upper border of the spotless windshield.

"I suppose you want to know what she was talking about," Felix said between clenched teeth. He sat with his head almost between his shoulders, with his strong, hard hands holding tightly to the dark-brown steering wheel.

"I haven't asked you about it."

"It'll be a relief to tell you and get it over with. Believe me or not, Laura, I was going to tell you the whole truth before I—well, I certainly don't want to talk about *that,* right now. At some other time, yes, but not till you know all about this thing."

Laura didn't feel that it would have been possible for anybody to comfort him at this moment. In the silence between them, she could hear the purr of tires and the steely chuckle of the car's exhaust.

"Actually it's why I was so secretive about myself back in New York, and didn't want to be seen by anybody who I didn't have to spend time with. I was sure that your friend, the actress, Rochelle something-or-other, recognized me; I know that my picture appeared in newspapers outside of Florida, too, after this hellish thing happened. It's been hardest thing of all for me to keep hiding the story from you, Laura."

"You're still hiding it," she reminded him gently.

"I'm talking *around* what happened, Laura, instead of talking about it. It's simple enough, and I can say it all in less than a minute as soon as I get my nerve up."

His face was inflamed and his voice had risen, which were the ways he generally responded to an emotional situation. But there wasn't any anger in him, only a dread of getting out the next word—and the one after that.

"My mother, you know, found herself with two

young boys to raise. If she needed advice from a man, she never asked for it. In fact, she pretty well kept herself alone, making decisions and forcing me and Harvey to carry them out. My father's business partner had offered to do what he could, but Mother turned his help down each and every time. That is, Laura, until Harvey had his car accident. Then she realized that there was a crisis she couldn't handle just by telling Harvey what to do and putting enough pressure on him till he did it."

"Your mother sounds," Laura hesitated, "fearsome."

"Occasionally she is, yes." Felix stared straight ahead of him at the road. "She went to Butterworth for advice. That was his name, Eldon Butterworth. He lived not too far from Coralton and in El Norte. He had never married, and now he got the idea that he and my mother would marry. They'd known each other for a long time, and they had a general background in common."

Laura nodded slowly and murmured, "It must be nice to have known the same person for years and years."

"But Eldon was too old to change his habits and get married for the first time," Felix went on carefully, "and my mother had decided that she'd lost two husbands already and wasn't going to put herself into the position where she might lose a third. In fact, she'd decided there wouldn't ever be a third husband. And when my mother makes up her mind to something, it nearly always happens that way."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Laura said.

A house appeared in the car lights, a glass-walled affair built between two trees. In back of it, was a garishly-lighted cabin of dark wood. One door was open, and it was possible to make out three cars parked inside.

"You still haven't told me much about Eldon Butterworth," Laura reminded him.

"There isn't much more," Felix said, slowing the car.

"He and my mother were friends for years, and when Harvey and I were growing up, we got so used to him that we called him Uncle Eldon. He became part of our lives. But I saw less and less of him because I went away to school; and when I came back for an occasional holiday at intersession times, I began to see Eldon in a different light than before. Instead of being generous, he seemed greedy and acquisitive, like a robber baron straight out of Gustavus Meyer's 'History of the Great American Fortunes'."

"Businessmen care for money, I've been told."

"But you've probably never seen these people up close, Laura, and you still have some illusions about them. Eldon was typical of the breed as it really is. He would talk about free enterprise as though such a thing really existed, and as if he wasn't ready to cut the throat of any real business opposition—or join with it to fix prices illegally. He would talk a lot about Government interference with free enterprise and never realize that he couldn't make even a reasonably good living unless the Government regulated standards and remained one of his biggest customers. I once told him that, and I said that *he* was growing fat and sassy under socialism; but his sixty-dollar-a-week clerks in the 'right-to-work' states, the men and women who'll be fired if they join a union—*those* people are living under the glories of the free enterprise system. I told him that if socialism is good enough for the rich, then that's the way everybody in this country ought to be living."

Laura smiled slightly. "It sounds as if you'd learned a lot at college."

"Oh, I was quoting one of my instructors, all right," Felix admitted. "And I'll be damned if Eldon didn't jump six feet in the air and call me a Communist and a Democrat. At any rate, you can see how his mind worked, and you can see how he'd react to a suggestion that part of El Norte ought to be used for setting up motels at fifty mile intervals."

"Do you mean that he was in favor of it?"

"Certainly. El Norte, he said, is only one place to live; and there are plenty of others if you feel that privacy is so necessary. You've got to move with the times, Eldon said to us at dinner on one certain evening. Besides, did we have any idea how much more valuable our properties would become if there were a real red-hot tourist rush? If we were to sell out just before the rush came to a peak, why, we'd clean up a small fortune."

Laura was beginning to understand for the first time what had happened between Felix and his late father's business partner.

"I take it for granted that you got angry at him."

"Of course. I felt as if I'd been betrayed by one of my own, so to speak. You know, Laura, there are still a few class-conscious snobs left in the faceless society that most people in this country seem to be bucking for; and us snobs expect a certain code of standards to be followed by our own class. I suppose I'm making a hash out of explaining this, Laura, but I really know what I mean—if that's any consolation."

"Probably you do." Laura didn't want to speculate about class structures; the image rising to her brain was that of Mrs. Page ordering Laura to leave Coralton forever. "And I take it that you rushed at Eldon Butterworth and hit him."

Felix said impassively, "I put my hands around his neck and tried to strangle him."

He made a right turn and he and Laura were in the garage. It was paved and comfortable-looking on the inside. Felix parked in the corner next to a Volkswagen in which Laura would have felt far more comfortable. After he was parked to his satisfaction—like most drivers, he had fussed over a parking place like an old maid with a ball of wool—Felix remained sitting in the driver's seat and looked down at his ten fingers spread out before him on the steering wheel.

"Did you choke him to death?" Laura asked, surprised at how calm she sounded.

"I tried my best, Laura, believe me. Of course this

happened at dinner, as I said, and my family had to stop me. Harvey ran around the table to us and did his best to calm me down. He even wanted, very gently, to pull me off Eldon. There was no sense to that, really; it was no time for appealing to my finer feelings. I pushed Harvey away from me, and that brought my mother directly into the mixup."

"Your mother didn't try to soothe you down, Felix, I take it."

"No, she kept hitting me with her cane till I became dizzy and reeled away. Eldon sat down, gasping. I'll swear his face was blue. My mother phoned a doctor, but Eldon got it into his head to go home before a doctor could get there; he didn't want to spend another second under one roof with me. In a way, I don't suppose I really blame him."

"What happened to the man?"

"He had left by the time the doctor arrived. My mother went with the doctor to Eldon's house and stayed there till Eldon had been thoroughly examined. The doctor said that Eldon had been badly shaken up, but there was nothing wrong with him. I assume that, from half-hints made in conversation between Eldon and my mother, the doctor was able to figure out who was responsible for what had happened to Eldon."

"But he wouldn't need to make it public unless there was a police investigation."

"There *was* one. During the night Eldon's heart acted up, and in the morning, he was dead. At the inquest, I was put on the griddle. No legal action was taken against me, but my mother insisted that I'd be a lot better off if I spent a few months out of the state. The New York offer came along, and I took it up. It turned out pretty well after all, Laura, considering that I met you."

Laura smiled, but said nothing.

Felix looked upset. "I don't suppose you'd want to—I mean, ever want to see me again. You probably think I might even hurt *you*."

Laura suddenly reached around and took both his

hands in hers. Then she drew them to the sides of her neck and pressed the palms against herself till her neck hurt.

Felix pulled his hands away and looked down at Laura, his eyes wide with wonder.

"You'll never regret—" he began.

A car horn blared in the garage. Felix slid away from Laura and turned his head. Another car was coming into the garage, and its owner was waving at him with cheerful encouragement, puckering his lips to indicate that Felix ought to kiss his girl friend. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

"With a jerk like him on the committee we might just as well forget about El N—" Felix stopped himself. "I'm not giving up, Laura. Let's go into the house and make some plans."

FIVE

FELIX ENTERED the house with the ease and familiarity of one who lived there. He told Laura afterwards that he knew the house and most of the others in El Norte only a little less well than he knew Coralton.

They walked past a long hall with a half-open piano and stool at one end and a table and three-legged chair at the other. Four sofas of two different widths, every one of them upholstered in orange, were arranged to form a conversation pit. A pair of pillows had been fluffed up and set on every couch.

A large-muscled man, who wore a sports shirt, slacks, and sandals, was talking about reproduction rights and the legalized robbery practiced by gallery owners in New York. He was introduced to Laura as Ned Boyer. She recognized the name and started to ask him about a certain series of abstract paintings he'd done, but he was turning away from her and talking once again about business details and legal technicalities. He seemed to know his subject very well.

The man to whom their host was talking was older and dressed all in black except for a crisp white shirt. His hair was gray at the temples, and he stood like a soldier on parade.

He nodded distantly at Felix, and his look at Laura was filled with quiet loathing.

Felix drew a breath tautly. Laura looked up at him with a reassuring smile, as if she hadn't been affected by the stranger's hatred.

"What's wrong, Gordon?" Felix asked the man,

having cleared his throat too noisily. "Are you sore on account of Janice?"

"I don't want to talk to you about my daughter," Gordon Ulric observed. "Do you mind?"

"Not in the least, but I don't want you giving Miss Foster here the bad eye."

Gordon Ulric said briskly, "If we have to talk this over, we can do it some other time, in private."

"I hope we understand each other, though, Gordon."

A newcomer interrupted cheerfully, "Are you men at each other's throats already? This ought to be a funny meeting."

He stood in the entrance, just beneath a catwalk at the point where it started to make a semicircle. It was the hornblowing man who had driven his ostentatious car into the garage just as Felix had been about to kiss Laura, and he was no more welcome at this moment than he had been then, as far as Felix was concerned.

The man was probably in his late forties; tall and ruddy-faced. He blinked rapidly and continuously, a sign that Laura recognized: he was wearing contact lenses and was reasonably new to the experience. He was apparently a cheerful man, with his thick lips on the brink of a smile. His teeth gleamed brightly, almost blindingly. He reminded Laura of an unshaved Santa Claus.

"Don't know you, young fellow," he said to Felix, "but you've got a nice taste in girls. My name is Clymer, Oscar Clymer. I've just moved into the forest here, a few gopher holes away. I took the Butterworth house."

"Felix Page here."

Each man offered a hand. Laura heard a sudden sound after their hands made contact, a sound that reminded her of a telegraph message being sent. Felix withdrew his hand hurriedly. Oscar Clymer laughed, throwing his head back happily, as he'd done in the garage.

"The old reliable jokes always work best." He raised one hand as if he were a policeman stopping traffic.

"Before you get around to calling me names, young fellow, I should tell you that I am the founder and president of the E-Z Joke Corporation. I manufacture and market what are called practical jokes. The reason I keep trying these things out, is that trying them out is part of my business. Mr. Ulric is a banker and he thinks about debentures; Ned Boyer is a painter and he thinks about chiarascuro; I'm in the practical joke business and I try out rubber glasses and joy buzzers on unsuspecting people. My heart has got to be in my work, you know. I have to be dedicated."

He smiled affably and sat down on one of the sofas.

"Well," he said to the room at large, "let's decide about keeping undesirable elements out of our neighborhood."

He chuckled, then cocked his head, frowned, smiled, and suddenly made certain noises suggestive of an Indian. Then he muttered to himself, "No, I lost my shirt on those cruddy rubber tomahawks."

The room filled up slowly with new arrivals, and Felix greeted nearly all of them with genuine pleasure. He asked them questions about how their lives had been proceeding in the last few months, and everybody he talked to sounded glad that Felix hadn't run into any more problems of a severe type. Someone said to Felix that he hadn't changed much in appearance since his school days, and Laura couldn't help feeling a certain awe in the presence of a man who had known Felix for such a long time.

Oscar Clymer, a thoughtful frown on his face, was near Laura when he asked the dignified Gordon Ulric, "What do you think of it? I mean, would you buy it for a kid or a grandson?"

"Frankly, the only gift I'd buy for a young child would be rather an average one, Mr.—ah—"

"Clymer, but the first name is Oscar and not Social—you know, social climber—get it? I was just thinking about Indians and that made me think about savages. You know, like the ones Tarzan fights. So I've got this idea for a joke package and I don't know

what's gonna be in it, but I've got the name for it and I think it looks good on a package. The name is 'Oomgowa!' It's got curiosity appeal and it makes 'em laugh, so it ought to catch my customers in the wallet. What do you think?"

Laura didn't notice how the stuffed-shirted Gordon Ulric managed to get away from Oscar Clymer's obtrusive cheerfulness, but when she looked at Clymer again, the man was sitting on another couch in the conversation pit, writing a memorandum.

Ned Boyer, the host, raised his hand half a dozen times, calling for quiet. There was a sudden sound that reminded Laura of the way a bomb sounds on television. Oscar Clymer looked around at the reactions and seemed like the only person in the room who hadn't been shocked. He handed a black, round ball, with a cord at one end, over to the host and chairman.

"The E-Z bomb," he said, pointing to a colophon just beneath the base of the cord. "Guaranteed to keep order at meetings, among other things. It has a hundred uses, none of them a bit important. Take this one with my compliments, Neddie, and use it in good health."

Ned Boyer smoothly avoided further discussion by holding the toy bomb in one hand. He said to the group, "We all know why we've come here, so let's talk about what we'll do to meet the danger head-on. Who'll start?—All right, Felix."

The group quieted down. Ned Boyer's wife, who was also dressed in sports clothes and sandals, served lukewarm coffee in paper cups as Felix began to talk.

"We all know that the danger consists of the hucksters coming in one step at a time and taking a bigger slices at every step," he said at the end of his short talk. "They're organized and militant; we haven't been, till I suggested our having this get-together. The question we have to decide is really a very simple one: How can we stop the hucksters?"

The silence that followed was broken by Oscar Clymer saying meditatively:

" 'Oomgowa!' Yes, that really sounds all right."

Gordon Ulric asked to be recognized. "I'd hate to think about a court fight and drawn-out litigation. I feel certain that our chances are better if we're quiet and reasonable and well-behaved about this."

Felix snapped, "The more noise we make, the better for us and for every other community that's faced with the same damn probl—"

Ned Boyer, never the man to let any discussion become heated—and therefore unbusinesslike—if he could help it, said:

"Gordon has the floor right now."

"It has suddenly occurred to me," Gordon Ulric said with a thin, unpleasant smile, "that there may be less harm in the long run if we let a few motels go up. It may save a lot of messy washing of dirty linen in public, and I don't see how much harm can be done if it's clearly understood that there will be no more new construction of that type in El Norte."

As he finished, he looked maliciously at Felix.

A lawyer in the group said, "But they never allow that to be the last word, not even if there's a contract involved. Once these people have got a foot in the door, they don't stop till they're all the way in and *you* have to leave."

Laura, sitting next to Felix, put up her hand. Ned Boyer looked around twice to make sure that nobody else wanted the floor, then shrugged quickly and gestured at Laura.

"It seems to me, as an outsider," Laura said, her voice commanding attention because of the low level at which she had set it, "that none of you should let personal feuds interfere with what's on your minds now. Preserving El Norte is much more important than settling a grievance that may not even be a real one."

She looked directly at Gordon Ulric as she spoke. The banker flushed and turned away, pretending that his interest was elsewhere.

"That's all," she added.

Felix's right hand engulfed hers, and he said quietly, "Bless you, Laura."

She smiled at him and then looked awkwardly down at her lap.

Oscar Clymer was recognized by the chairman and said, "Why don't we tell the motel people we'll put stink bombs in their lobbies if they go through with this? I can get you all the bombs you'd need, and between us, we can make those people's lives miserable."

A man Laura didn't know suggested brightly, "Look here, all of you! If progress, so-called, really is inevitable in El Norte, we can get up a syndicate and put up some motels ourselves. After all, why shouldn't *we* be the ones to get it, so to speak, while it's hot?"

During the pained silence that greeted this suggestion, Ned Boyer made a point of looking up at the ceiling.

"I'll admit that the idea has been thought of already," he said after a while, "by me, among others. But it's been decided to put that off as a last desperate measure. It can only be called an admission of retreat; here, we all have to go on the assumption that El Norte can be left intact."

"I have a serious suggestion, for once," Oscar Clymer said, waving the memorandum book as if it were the map to a gold mine. "There are too many of us here to do the gut work, and a few people have to get together and do it. I move that we appoint a committee to make a report, and meanwhile," the old impish grin was back, "we can find out how much our houses are worth to the motel owners and souvenir shop people."

"If I may step out of the chairman's seat for just a second," Ned Boyer said, "I want to tell you that I'm against the concept of a committee. It's only an excuse to put off doing work that has got to be done. There has to be one man at the helm, and that man has got to be responsible, as well as being committed to preserving El Norte."

Laura said automatically, "Felix. You have to appoint him because he cares the most for it."

Gordon Ulric, his lips pursed, said, "I'm not sympathetic to the thinking in back of this whole scheme because of—well, various reasons; so I'm withdrawing my co-operation." He stood up. "But before I go, let me point out that the entire community of El Norte is likely to get a black eye if we permit a young man to run wild and knock over all the opposition physically, if he feels driven to that particular extreme."

He made a point of smiling politely around the room, then turned to leave. His back was straight and his head erect. At the doorway he shook hands ceremoniously with Ned Boyer's wife and pecked her lightly on the cheek. Janice's father could not have done more to act as if nothing untoward had happened.

Felix spoke up when he was given permission, and purposely waited till Gordon Ulric's footsteps had faded away. "I want to point out that making me a committee of one to report on methods for saving the situation has got it's definite advantages to all of us. For one thing, I'm so upset about this business that I'd probably spend my time with whoever else might be appointed instead of me, with the result that there'd actually be a committee of two. But speed is important, and one man is likely to work faster than two or more. Most important of all, I'm an architect and I've seen this sort of takeover tried before by packs of hucksters; if anybody can figure out ways of beating them this time, I can."

Ned Boyer rubbed his chin thoughtfully with a forefinger, then winked as he saw that the next man to be recognized was Oscar Clymer.

The practical joke manufacturer clutched his memo book tightly to one side as he talked. "I've got to admit, folks, that I don't see anything wrong with the idea of giving this gent here the job he's so anxious to get."

Felix nodded his thank you.

Clymer saluted with his left hand, then added thoughtfully, "But you have to realize that I haven't lived in El Norte long enough to make friends or enemies. I'm simply not attached to the place. I suppose it sounds to some of you people like high treason, but I know that if I had to sell my house tomorrow because somebody had put up a peanut stand in front of it, for instance, I wouldn't think I was in the middle of a Greek tragedy; I'd sell and forget about it. If there's some real advantage to getting out, then let's all do it."

"Thank you," Ned Boyer said quickly, smiling in gratitude that Clymer hadn't exploded another one of his practical jokes in the room. "Does anybody else want to—Arnie?"

The next speaker, a tall and disreputable looking man with a two-day growth of beard, started to say, "I approve of the notion of putting Felix to work—"

Felix leaned over toward Laura. "That guy talks forever and a day; I wanted to thank you for suggesting me for this job. It's exactly what I've been hoping for."

He was whispering, and his breath tickled her left ear. Laura whispered in return, "I genuinely enjoyed doing it."

"Yes, I know you did. I could sense that you were getting a boot out of it."

"Could you?"

"Yes, Laura. It seems that we're very much attuned to each other."

"I hope so."

"I've been thinking about that, Laura, and my notion is that we ought to be even more attuned to each other than we are already."

"How can we manage that?"

"Well, this is no place to talk about it in detail, you know."

"We aren't *talking* in the proper sense of the words, Felix. We're whispering."

"I didn't have the slightest idea I was going to get onto this subject right now, of all the times in the world. I still don't know how it happened."

Laura said slowly, "We can save it for another night, if you want. Or for afterwards."

"No, you don't understand. It's gone too far already. I ought to say this thing now and get it over with, Laura. I ought to take myself out of the miseries."

"Have you been miserable, Felix?"

"For the last couple of weeks I've known for sure that I was going to ask you—" he paused long enough to look at her smiling lips and bright eyes. "You're a devil, a real practicing devil. You should put out your shingle and let the whole world know."

"We've come a long way from talking about that special subject of yours, Felix, whatever it is."

"How do you mean, 'whatever it is'? Don't you know damn well what I'm talking about?"

"I suppose I do."

"Well, Laura, what about it?"

"I'm not trying to drive you to distraction, Felix, but you really have to *say* it."

"You're a vain creature, Laura Foster."

"No, it's not that. It's just that so much of one's life is spent away from the pleasant emotional moments, that a girl needs every one that comes her way as something to remember. But I don't suppose you can sympathize with a word I'm saying."

"I'll try my best."

"It's lucky I can say anything at all when we have to whisper like children at school."

"I'll write you a note instead, and you can sue me for breach of promise afterwards."

"Nobody in a courtroom would believe you were serious, bringing up a thing like this right now, Felix."

"It brought itself up."

"And you're just an innocent bystander, Felix? Do you expect any court to believe that?"

"It's just that the whole thing has been on my mind

for such a long time, and on top of everything else, it's been unsettl—"

Ned Boyer interrupted the recognized speaker to say, "Felix, we'd all be able to hear what's happening on the floor a lot more easily if you wouldn't whisper so much."

Felix nodded, to show that he understood. The speaker began, "There has to be a deadline for the first report, and I suggest we make it as brief a deadline as possible. Let me remind you of how much time we've already wasted. To start with, we all rememb—"

Again Felix whispered, "It'll take him a century to get back to the heart of his point."

"Then you have time to talk to me about that certain mystical subject."

"Oh, heavens, I thought you'd forgotten all about that! Well, no, I don't really suppose you would."

"Forget about what?"

"Don't play Little Miss Innocence with me." His voice was pitched at what she could only think of as an affectionate growl. "You know we're talking about an —an arrangement for you and me."

" 'Arrangement' is a peculiar word."

"A legalized arrangement is what I mean."

"I understand that the sort of thing you probably have in mind, Felix, becomes legal after seven years. There's a common-law statute, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're driving me out of my head! If you keep on like this, I'll be a wreck in no time."

"Well, we can fix *that,* if it doesn't please you. Goodbye, Felix."

"No, wait." His hand was held tightly against hers. "You know I'm too tongue-tied to say the words directly, Laura, but I really think we could—you know —work out together."

"Yes, Felix," she agreed softly. "I think we could make it work."

"I'm difficult, you know," he said. "Very moody sometimes and temperamental as all hell."

"I'd be able to get along with you."

"Sometimes I get so excited that I can't bring myself to say anything, and I hit out instead. I'm sure I'd never do that to you, Laura, but it's happened with other people."

"I can't say I'm not being warned," she told him in words she was to remember vividly in the near future.

"All right, then, here goes: Laura, will you marry me?"

"Yes, oh yes."

"When? I mean how soon?"

"Tomorrow, if that's what you want."

"Let's make it on Sunday, Laura, and get that part of things over with; I couldn't stand waiting."

"All right, then, Felix. Sunday."

"We'd have to invite people very quickly."

"There's nobody I'd especially want to invite."

He asked, "Are you doing that on my account? I'm still jumpy about being seen, yes, but I'm perfectly willing to—"

"You don't have to take any chances on unpleasantness, not even for a minute," Laura said sincerely.

Ned Boyer raised his voice. "Won't you two please be quiet? I would think you'd want to listen pretty carefully, Felix, because we've just taken a vote that concerns you."

"A vote?" Felix sighed, as if he was a balloon with all the air seeping out of him. "About me?"

"You've been appointed to make a report to the rest of us on the whole problem of what's involved in preserving El Norte," Ned Boyer said in his most crisp and businesslike tone of voice. "There's only one angle to it, though, that you probably won't like a bit."

Felix waited, looking from left to right.

"We want that report in exactly one week from tonight," Ned Boyer added.

"A week?" Felix looked dismayed. "But I was planning—" He turned to Laura.

She smiled. "That's perfectly all right, dear. You have to help take care of this business."

He leaned forward and whispered to her, "Do you mind if we invite these people? It'll be a quiet ceremony at the house, and a few friends ought to be welcome. I'm sure you'll like all of them as much as I do when you get to know them better."

"Of course, Felix," she said. "Invite every one of your friends if you want to."

Felix cleared his throat. "There's something I'd like to tell you," he began, blushing furiously as he stood up and gestured at Laura to stand next to him.

Never in her life had Laura spent a night and day even remotely like the rest of that Friday night and all of Saturday.

She and Felix went home and held hands and talked till morning. When old Mrs. Page apeared for breakfast, Felix nerved himself to tell her the news. Mrs. Page tried to get Felix to postpone the wedding, but he refused, in no uncertain terms. Mrs. Page said nothing at all after that, and Laura told herself gratefully that the older woman was going to be a big help after all.

She soon found out that Mrs. Page planned to do absolutely nothing. Laura embarked on a day's work that would make her dizzy long before mid-afternoon. She had to order a ready-made gown and arrange for catering facilities. The caterer must have made contact with somebody on El Norte's newspaper, because a photographer came out to take pictures of the happy couple. Laura, of course, refused for herself and Felix. The argument was cut short when Harvey Page said cheerfully that he himself would pose for pictures instead. The photographer sighed, shrugged, and took one picture of Felix's half-brother. Harvey had been as excited as a small boy all during the day, and he went into transports of happiness when he was told that he'd be the best man.

Rehearsals for the wedding were complicated by old Mrs. Page's absence. Laura memorized her future

mother-in-law's part as well as her own, confident that the older woman would change her mind about participation, when it was time for the wedding to begin.

She had discovered Mrs. Page in the salon and started talking to her about it. Mrs. Page said, "Stop!", and when Laura kept looking at her accusingly, got up from her soft chair and walked to the door.

The library phone rang as she was on her way out. Felix, who had been drawing up part of his preliminary report on ways of keeping El Norte intact, answered it. He spoke briefly, then said something in a loud voice, and replaced the phone with a furious clatter.

Laura eased past old Mrs. Page and ran out of the door and into the library. It was a large room, and hundreds of books lined on variously-sized shelves gave it an odor of cheeses swathed in cloth. Felix was shaking a fist at the telephone.

"What happened, dear?" she asked mildly.

"That moron called up," he said finally, after having gasped for breath. "That damned idiot."

Laura waited, rather than mention some name at random and make him even more angry at what he'd think of as her obtuseness.

"That Clymer, the idiot with the practical jokes," Felix said, drawing his fists in and out. "If I had him here, I'd strangle him."

"What did he say?"

"He wanted me to know that he is now part-owner of two parcels of land in El Norte and that he's going to build on them if he and his partner can get permission from the suburban development people."

Laura asked shrewdly, "That isn't why you're so upset, Felix, is it? You wouldn't care this much if one or two houses were going up."

"*Housing projects* may be going up," Felix said slowly. "That you-know-what is planning to build two housing projects here in El Norte. He says he doesn't

like the idea personally, but he wants me to know that nobody can stop the wave of the future."

"He's wrong," Laura said, surprised at her own vehemence. "But I assume that he won't try to go through with it if you prove that El Norte can be saved."

"That's what he hinted."

"Don't you see the point, then, dear? You have to come up with the best report that any man has ever seen. You've got to give them plans and a positive program to save El Norte, and you'd better do it quickly."

"Y-yes," Felix agreed, looking down at the scrambled sheets on the desk in front of him. "Yes, of course."

But he sat down an inch at a time and looked around sadly for a ball-point pen.

"It's on top of the Atlas," Laura said impatiently. Then she added, "That man Clymer jokes about so many things, he might be joking about this, too."

"He definitely isn't," Felix said slowly. "He reminded me that both land parcels were owned by Gordon Ulric alone, and that he's partners with Gordon in destroying us. I can understand what Clymer is doing. After all, he himself says that he's got no attachment to the place. But I can't understand Gordon Ulric taking such a big part in it. Why, Gordon has lived in El Norte all his life."

Laura said slowly, "I assume that Gordon Ulric is bitter about your not having married his daughter."

"Oh!" The light of belligerence flamed again in Felix's eyes. "He'll damn well have to get used to it, and to hell with him."

Felix was over his temporary paralysis, she saw thankfully. The stormy few moments had emphasized how tired Laura herself was, how dizzy from having had to plan everything for the marriage by herself in such a short time.

She turned to go, and saw Mrs. Page standing in the library door. Felix's mother had been watching the two

of them. Now she gripped the crook of her cane more tightly and gestured down the hall.

"You," she said to Laura. "The other room."

Laura walked first into the salon. She had intended to stand up during her confrontation (if that's what it was to be) with Felix's mother, but she took one of the soft, garish chairs instead. She closed her eyes and waited. The tap-tap of Mrs. Page's cane came closer down the hallway. The door of the room was suddenly shut, and the tapping sounded as if it was beneath the chair. Laura opened her eyes. Mrs. Page was sitting down so as to face her across the cocktail table.

"You handled that very well," she said, paying Laura her first compliment. "Felix gets these tantrums occasionally—as you must know by this time—and somebody has to hear him out."

"I realize that."

"He was always a good, quiet boy, but every so often he'd get angry to a point where he was beyond words. A woman would go up to her room and cry, but Felix doesn't have that type of relief available to him."

Laura wondered if Mrs. Page would have such relief available to herself. In a crisis, this woman would probably try to shout down the opposition and demand that matters be handled the way she wanted them. This was the sort of woman who would charge into all opposition; and it was puzzling to Laura that Mrs. Page should be talking almost pleasantly to someone she'd probably have liked to poison.

"I want to make my position clear beyond all dispute," Mrs. Page said. "I don't approve of this marriage on such short notice and to somebody who Felix hardly knows. On the other hand, I have to admit that I find Gordon Ulric's recent behavior so abysmal, that if Felix suddenly wanted to marry that girl of his, I'd scream the house down."

Laura said, "I take it that you aren't going to pester Felix about the marriage."

"No, but when you two begin having your first big

arguments I'll tell Felix that he shouldn't expect anything different, because he married against his mother's wishes." Mrs. Page held up her free hand to stop Laura. "One of the privileges of being older is that you can second-guess your children for not having done what you wanted."

"Why are you telling me about how you expect to be giving Felix a difficult time in the future?" Laura's voice was icy. "I'll do my best to see that it doesn't happen, whether you make threats about it or not."

Mrs. Page asked suddenly, "What has Felix done to deserve so much loyalty from any human creature?"

Laura said after a pause, "I don't want to be rude, but I've been terribly busy today so far and there are any number of other things that have to be done before I can go to bed."

"Sit back," Mrs. Page said with so much authority in her voice, that Laura obeyed in spite of herself. "I'll talk to you about the preparations in a little while. It occurs to me that you'll have no friends at the wedding and that you will be, and actually are, all alone."

"I'm perfectly comfortable."

"That's hard to believe. It's unfortunate that no one close to you can take you into a corner and tell you about the good and bad parts of marriage and what follows. You really are an innocent child with no mother to guide her."

"Would you want me to be guided and warned, Mrs. Page, or pushed around?"

"Pushed around, my dear, and told in no uncertain terms exactly what to do," Mrs. Page admitted. "Youth is indeed wasted on children."

"If you'll excuse me," Laura began.

"No, I will not! Sit down and listen to me. I want to talk to you about—well, about calamities."

"I don't understand."

"You will if you listen." Mrs. Page shuttled her cane from one hand to another. "Everybody is calamity-prone, Laura Foster, and you shouldn't expect eternal

happiness. A wife or a husband is a hostage to fortune and as a result you become more vulnerable no matter how hard you try to fight it."

Laura understood that Mrs. Page must have battled vigorously against the inroads of capricious fortune on her life. The battle showed in her lined face, her gray hair, and even in the cane, which she must have adopted with bitterness and loathing.

"I realize," Laura said slowly, "that you've started to believe that I'm in love with Felix and you're trying to warn me that the future won't be perfect. I ought to thank you, but I can't make myself think about future calamities. I'm sure you understand that."

"All my men have been calamity-prone," Mrs. Page went on as if there had been no interruption. "I've been widowed twice, you know, and in a sense, Harvey has been taken away from me. He's perfectly polite. He's well-behaved. He even has a good deal of skill at tinkering with machinery. But he practically admitted last night at the dinner table that he has left the world, so to speak, as my husbands have done, but in a different way and even more effectively."

Mrs. Page cocked her head to one side to help bring her thoughts together. Those sharp eyes never left Laura, silently commanding her to stay where she was.

Laura could understand that for Mrs. Page, the only true, close relative left her was Felix, and that she dreaded losing any part of her control over him.

"You say that all your men have been calamity-prone," Laura reminded her swiftly. "Do you think that for Felix to marry me would be a calamity?"

"Felix is prone to trouble in other ways. He's been reasonably normal up to now, but he very nearly destroyed his future several months ago during an argument that I'm sure could have been avoided, somehow. You might be able to take care of him very nicely up to a point, but Felix may be lost to both of us when he gets past that point."

Laura said firmly, "Felix isn't nearly as difficult as you make him out to be."

"Then I think we understand each other in spite of your blind loyalty to my son," Mrs. Page remarked. "I've been trying to tell you, in a roundabout way, that Felix is unusually difficult and that his happiness may hang by a thread. Any personal remarks I've made about myself will be forgotten by each of us." And from her manner, it was plain that she really expected Laura to forget everything she had said that wasn't about Felix.

"There is only one other thing for us to talk about," she added. "I'm not going to let Gordon Ulric and his daughter find out that I didn't approve of this marriage at the last moment and cause a gossip's holiday by not appearing. Tell me what preparations you've made for the wedding."

Laura paid no further heed to unpleasantness of any description. She took a deep breath and launched into a full-scale review of her plans and accomplishments.

Mrs. Page listened as if carved of stone. No sign of consent or disapproval passed her lips. Laura thought she was probably trying to keep from showing her resentment that so much had been done without her having had control of it.

"I shall, of course, give my son away," she said when Laura was finished. "I'll march with him to a point ten feet short of the altar. Is that clear?"

Laura nodded. It wasn't quite the way she had planned matters, but she knew better than to try and overrule this strong-willed woman. The important point, though, was that Mrs. Selina Page would take a part in the wedding, thereby giving her blessing (in public, at least) to the match.

Laura couldn't help feeling that matters were going to work out very well. Very well, indeed.

SIX

THE CEREMONY wasn't scheduled till two o'clock, but things started to go wrong by eleven.

Laura had been sent upstairs at Mrs. Page's command, given in a voice that would brook no disagreement whatever. A number of women went up with her to help her to fit the dress on, and they burbled happily all the while. For her own piece of mind, Laura talked to Felix on the house phone during a pause in the fitting, and made sure he wasn't upset or irritated. As she couldn't possibly know what was happening downstairs, she was spared the sight of sheer chaos.

For one thing, the extra folding chairs that were supposed to be sent by one of the neighbors simply didn't come. Harvey refused to ride over and pick them up, since his fear of cars was so acute. Felix had to make the trip himself, along with Susan, the maid. As it happened, a number of the chairs were thoroughly worthless, so that Felix and Susan had to go to another neighbor and pick up additional chairs.

The caterer arrived on time, but the food wasn't nearly as good as Mrs. Page had hoped and expected. Mrs. Page, ever superlative when it came to needling businessmen in direct contact with the public, saw to it that the difficulty was corrected; but it took valuable time and stretched Laura's nerves taut.

The clergyman arrived and spent some time with the bridegroom-to-be. Felix and Laura had pulled strings in order to cut the usual waiting time required in Flor-

ida, between taking out a marriage license and actually going through with the ceremony. Still, there seemed to be some last-minute formalities that needed attention. After his session with Felix, the Reverend Mr. Watson went upstairs to talk with Laura.

At the time, Laura's mind was on almost anything else, other than the questions he asked her. She gave so many wrong or muddled answers, that the clergyman's questions took much longer than would have been the case otherwise. By the time Laura finally pulled herself together, it was half-past one, and only thirty minutes of being unmarried remained to her.

She was told by the maid, Susan, that Felix was with a few friends downstairs who were joking about Felix's former sweethearts; about his new "ball-and-chain"; and over the fact that almost no bachelors were left in "the old gang". Felix was among long-time friends, so he took the kidding with ease and good temper.

The weather had started the day threateningly, and just when the onrush of guests was reaching its height, rain started to come down. A peal of lightning whitened the sky and the parched ground.

"The perfect touch," Laura told herself ruefully in her room upstairs. "It's nature's version of one of Felix's blasts of temper. I hope Felix isn't as jumpy about all this as I am."

The guests, most of them men who had been at the meeting night before last, were coming to Coralton. The married men brought their wives. But the conversation wasn't nearly as jovial as the gay chatter that most of them were used to making while taking part at weddings. Most of the wives walked together in pairs or small groups so that they could speak without being overheard.

"Beautiful house, but I've never been too fond of these period places, dear."

"The house is expensive, of course, but the wedding can't be costing Selina Page too much money. It's a rush job if ever I saw one."

"Selina looks *resigned*. Did you notice?"

And the men, after brief but repeated remarks about another good man going down the drain, commented:

"Might as well take it easy in this weather because I'm sure not going to get any fishing done."

"I was hoping to try out some new golf clubs myself, but there's no chance of it now."

"While you men are stopped by the weather, I can always go to where it's warm and sunny—my hothouse. Do you know, there's one flower really hard to grow once you've planted it, and that's nothing more or less than the Rhododendron? A fact. My wife's got me interested in hothouses generally."

"You're too old and creaky to play golf these days, Charlie, and you know it as well as I do. Seriously, though, is it true what I hear about you planning a merger with ———?"

Then, tentatively, the pianist struck up the first notes of Mendelssohn's Wedding March.

Laura was in the rear anteroom with Ned Boyer and his wife. The painter had been scowling at the furnishings of the house, and especially, at the paintings.

"Not a single Boyer in this dump," he muttered. "Talk about 'bad taste.' "

"Mrs. Page likes classical work," Laura said, glancing into the large room as it was slowly filling with guests.

"Vermeers!" Ned Boyer exploded. "A Vermeer is a bad investment because you can't be sure whether it's an original or if it was painted by that Dutchman who forged so many Vermeers during the Second World War."

Barbara Boyer, Ned's wife, said wearily, "Oh, forget about business for once in your life."

"You're the one who's matron of honor today, not me. I still have to get my hands dirty up to here when we get home."

Barbara smiled wearily. "Let's have one of our real old-fashioned knock-down and drag-out arguments, so we can show Laura what married life is really li— Oh,

look who just came into the room. The practical joker himself."

Laura leaned forward to see. Oscar Clymer, his head straight and blinking furiously as though his contact lenses were giving him a difficult time, was raucously greeting everyone he knew in the room. He paused before a seat next to the center aisle.

"Felix hates him," Laura said. "It's a shame he was included in the general invitation."

Harvey Page was coming into this anteroom, tapping at his right hand pocket and smiling even more widely than he generally did.

Laura stopped him before he could wander into the ballroom. "Do you see that fellow over there, Harvey? The one who keeps his head so straight?"

"Yes, sure. Do you want me to call him for you?"

"No, what I'd like you to do is make sure he doesn't sit in the aisle. Please, Harvey. I don't want Felix to see him close when he walks to the altar."

"Okay," Harvey nodded casually. "I'll ask the guy to sit further away and tell him why. I'm sure he won't mind."

Before she could get hold of her affable brother-in-law-to-be and keep him in place, he had walked around her and into the large room.

In desperation, Laura turned to Ned Boyer. The painter nodded and stepped into the ballroom as Mrs. Selina Page was telling her first-born son:

"You're the best man, so you have to be with Felix. Go to him right now."

"Mother, I just have to take a minute to—"

There was only one way of talking to Harvey, it seemed, if results were wanted quickly. Selina Page stamped a foot and commanded: "Now, Harvey. Now."

It was a close call, but Harvey turned around and hurried out of the ballroom. He shrugged helplessly at Laura when he passed her and then hurried up the stairs to join his half-brother. Laura remembered Harvey saying that his father's last name hadn't been Page, and she felt sure that it hadn't been Chesterfield,

either; Harvey's brand of diplomacy was anything but Chesterfieldian.

Which left the problem of Oscar Clymer's close-to-the-aisle position. Laura, peering through the crack in the door, saw with relief that Ned was on his way over to Clymer with a persistence that wouldn't be halted by anybody. The two of them talked for a short time, she saw, and as soon as she realized that each man was on his feet she felt sure that Ned Boyer wasn't likely to let matters go wrong.

The piano player unleashed a number of loud chords, one of them jibing with a flash of lightning outside. Rain slanted down and thudded against the windows on the northeast side of the house.

"Upstairs with you," Barbara Boyer said cheerfully. "I'll tell you when we're to come down again."

Laura glanced in through the partly-open door and saw Ned Boyer easing his way toward the aisle seat before which Oscar Clymer was standing.

"I just want to make sure—" Laura started to say.

"There's no time," Barbara Boyer snapped. "Ned will handle that jerk, if it's possible. Now hurry!—— Thank heavens, you're moving at last."

"Your husband's a dear," Laura said, hurrying up the back stairs and into a small room near the front.

"He's acting out of enlightened self-interest, I'm sure," Barbara said, grinning. "He'll probably do his darnedest to get some stock tips from that fellow."

The pianist struck up *O Promise Me*. In the hallway, she heard men's footsteps descending the stairs. To hide her excitement, even from herself, Laura looked out the window at the rugged, green-tinged beauty of El Norte, proudly taking the rain to itself and seeming to gird its forces against the majestic thunder and lightning.

Then Barbara Boyer, holding the door open, said, "Now!"

Laura eased the veil over her face and lifted the bridal bouquet. Barbara Boyer blew a kiss with her lips.

"Good luck, darling," she whispered. "Good luck from all your people who aren't here."

Only a few more minutes now, she told herself. The ceremony wouldn't take too long, and then Felix would raise her veil and kiss her. The two of them would walk back down the aisle and into the reception room. People would ask them cheerfully whether or not they enjoyed married life, and others would come over to Felix in the embarrassed manner to give him envelopes with their checks inside. Felix would tuck the envelopes into his breast pocket and heartily shake hands with the giver.

It would be just like a dozen and one other weddings after all: only this one was hers and Felix's.

And yet she couldn't seem to concentrate on it. She was in the hall now and on the stairs. The smell of fresh varnish pierced the smell of the flowers in her hands. The carpeting was slightly loose and her shoes wavered; another quarter-inch difference, she thought in panic, and she'd have been tumbling down the stairs.

". . . *that someday you and* . . ."

As she reached the lower steps she could hear words being spoken in the ballroom. Harvey was leaning over and talking to Oscar Clymer, who sat next to the aisle after all. It was Felix who pulled Harvey away and over to where the clergyman waited.

Laura could imagine what Harvey had been saying, and shuddered at the notion. Oscar Clymer hadn't budged. He looked red-faced but self-assured in spite of it. In back of him, also next to the aisle, and waiting patiently in case of any more trouble, was Ned Boyer. —Laura found out afterwards that the painter had edged Oscar Clymer out of one aisle seat, just as he had intended to, and that Clymer had simply sat down on the aisle seat in the row before him.

A peal of thunder cracked savagely against Laura's eardrums. She exchanged glances with Barbara Boyer and walked with measured paces into the room which she wouldn't leave until she was married.

Mrs. Page was standing at the point where the ma-

tron of honor was supposed to stop, and her nearness to Laura added to the impression that she was giving the bride away too. It was an odd effect, and one that would probably set the women to gossipping furiously when they did their post-mortems on the wedding.

Though Felix himself must have been in the seventh circle of hell because of his congenital shyness, he managed to smile confortingly at Laura as she reached him. The clergyman spoke in level tones about the sanctity of marriage, its difficulties and joys. *This can't be my wedding,* Laura thought. *It's happening so simply and quickly.*

At the appropriate moment, Harvey took out the wedding ring from a vest pocket. Felix didn't want to reach out noticeably for the ring, so that Harvey made a move forward as if he himself was going to put it on Laura's hand. Felix stopped him, took the time to touch Harvey reassuringly on an arm, and put the ring on the third finger of Laura's left hand.

The words were spoken. Felix lifted her veil and hesitated for a long moment, as if this was too much for a man to go through in public.

The clergyman whispered, "Kiss her, for heaven's sake, man! Or you'll make the girl a laughing-stock."

Lightly, but comfortingly, Felix kissed her. In the audience, women applauded and gasped, as if no man had ever kissed a woman before and it was an ingenious idea.

The pianist struck up Mendelssohn's *Wedding March.* Felix gave Laura his arm as they started to walk down the aisle. Laura made a point of leaning towards him and whispering as they walked.

"Do you feel different, now that you're married?" she asked.

"No, not a bit. You?"

"I don't, either." Briskly she added, "I hope there isn't going to be any trouble again with Harvey."

"I warned him not to even look at Clymer during the route back, except to keep out of the man's way."

"That's a relief. Talking about troubles, Felix, I

nearly fell on the rug coming down the stairs. If I'd been walking a little bit faster, I'd have fallen smack on my face."

"Well, that would've made the wedding even more memorable, because I'd have denied any acquaintance with such a clumsy exhibition—God Almighty!"

It happened swiftly, and no one in the ballroom could have guessed what Oscar Clymer was going to do when Harvey passed him. After all, Clymer was a successful businessman. He had even joined Gordon Ulric in planning to put up housing projects in El Norte. If such a formidable person were to become deeply offended at something, and even if he were furiously angry, he would have been expected to preserve his dignity at almost any cost. But what Oscar Clymer actually did was to strike out at his recent tormentor with a childish practical joke.

Harvey, following strict orders from Felix, as well as from his mother, hadn't said a word to Clymer when he approached the other man as he returned from the altar behind the newly married couple. He had glanced at Clymer, as he told Felix afterwards, and moved slightly closer to mid-aisle so that he wouldn't be near the man. But Clymer, unwilling to let the incident of a few minutes ago be forgotten, simply thrust out a foot and tripped Harvey up. Harvey called out with surprise and fright and then went sprawling. The top of his head cannoned into Laura's back, and he struck the floor as she was whirling around to help him.

Her hands were outstretched to Harvey when she realized that Felix had left her side.

It was Ned Boyer, she saw, who probably saved Clymer's life. The painter forced his body between the two men. Felix stretched out both hands and tried to close them around Clymer's neck. Clymer called out and pulled his large head backwards. There was a glassy tinkle against an uncarpeted stretch of floor as one of his contact lenses struck it. A series of warning shouts had risen from the audience.

Laura ran toward her husband. As she touched his

right shoulder soothingly, he flicked it back in order to dislodge her. It was Laura's first run-in with her husband's brute strength, and it wasn't one that she was likely to forget. For the first time, it occurred to her, as she reeled back, that she hoped Felix would never become as angry at her as he was at Oscar Clymer.

This man of hers—she hated to think so, but it seemed to be true—could pose a life-and-death danger to someone he hated.

Part Two

From a Check to a View

SEVEN

"I'd swear that there's moonlight shining all around us," Laura said, puzzled, "but there's no moon out."

"What did you say?" Felix, preoccupied and frowning in the steel chair opposite her, looked across in surprise.

"I was wondering how there can be a moonlight effect out here and no sign of a moon."

"Because I asked a landscape architect how to get the effect and did the work myself," Felix said, "and because I pushed a few buttons in the cellar before we came outside. The lights are so small you can hardly see them from here and they're mostly on trees or behind bushes."

"You do get the effect of highlights and subtle shadows," Laura said. "It's very restful."

Felix sighed. "I wish I could get myself to feel rested."

Laura's attention was diverted. "What's wrong, dear?"

"I'm worrying about how to stop the building schemes for El Norte. There couldn't be anything else wrong, Laura, believe me."

She smiled at the compliment, but remarked, "You told me you had worked out a plan that's sure to keep El Norte away from the vultures."

"That's right, Laura, I have."

"Then why on earth should you be upset any longer about it?"

"Because—well, can't you guess?"

He straightened up, and she looked quizzically at the sharp features which had become so familiar over the last few weeks. It was Wednesday night. Laura had spent the previous day in New York City, closing up her apartment and arranging to have her effects shipped out to Coralton. Before the wedding, she had phoned to explain her new situation to the director of the show she'd been rehearsing, so she didn't have to spend time with any theatre people during this short trip. Felix had used the three days since their wedding prowling El Norte in general, and Coralton in particular, while he refined his plans to keep El Norte intact.

During these few days, Mrs. Page had insisted that Laura and Felix settle down in the second wing of Coralton. Except that she and Harvey were serviced by the same kitchen staff, it was like being a next-door neighbor. Mrs. Page avoided talking to Laura any more often than was necessary to give one of those orders that was only thinly disguised as a suggestion.

Harvey had been relatively quiet, too, in the last few days. The only subject on his mind seemed to be the humiliation he had endured at Felix's wedding.

"How could that man have done such a thing to me?" Harvey asked during one dinner, his eyes wide with shock.

"Why not forget it?" Felix said tiredly. "His throat probably still hurts him and his feet had been kicked black and blue before he left the ballroom."

Mrs. Page snapped, "Change the subject, Harvey, by all means. You're beginning to sound like a broken record."

Harvey obligingly tried to talk about something else, but his words were halting and the thoughts disjointed.

Wedding presents were still coming in from out-of-town friends and relatives. One of Laura's former foster parents sent a broiler, which she didn't need at all, but the sight of it moved her to tears. She sat down and wrote a long, heartfelt thank you letter, forcing herself not to remember how unkind that particular couple had seemed to her when she had been a charge of theirs.

She was beginning to understand, too, what made newly married people say that they could no longer recall how it felt to be single. When she woke up in the morning, Felix was there. At breakfast time she was with him; and at dinner time as well. They talked about what had happened to them during the day, and each was beginning to realize that nobody else in the world except the other would really care.

They had even gone through their first mild argument. It had happened last night, while they were in bed, when Laura had been planning a furniture change and was talking about it in detail. Felix had suddenly yawned and turned his back on her to prepare for sleep.

In spite of herself, Laura had asked with dismay, "Are you tired already?"

"It's been a full day." Felix half-turned. "Why do you suppose women talk so much in bed? Or why do you suppose they save the things that are most important to them to discuss late at night when you want to go to sleep?"

Laura couldn't help asking how he'd found out so much about women's nocturnal habits. Her voice alerted Felix to the mistake he'd made, and he pointed out that his previous experiences had been acquired before he knew her. Laura forgave him at long last, and she was so artful that Felix didn't realize that he'd

been kept awake till two o'clock. As soon as Laura pointed out her small triumph, he grinned, turned away from her and promptly fell asleep. Laura tossed and turned for another half hour before sleep overtook her.

But on this Wednesday night, for the first time since the wedding, fear for her new husband and for herself soared again to the surface of her mind. From that time onward, the fear wouldn't go away.

"You're right, Laura," he said. "I have figured out the only possible way to keep El Norte the way it is. I've got it at last. I suppose it was in my head all this time, really, but it only became part of my consciousness a few days ago."

"Then there shouldn't be anything to worry about." A lock of Laura's blonde hair straggled over her brows and she pushed it back in place. The steel chair gleamed in artificial moonlight.

"It's the presentation that might not be easy," he said. "I'm so wrapped up in this, that at the first sign of trouble, I'm likely to make a beeline for somebody's neck."

"Felix, you can't go through your whole life losing your temper at any provocation."

"I haven't always done that, Laura, no matter what you might think. It's just that saving El Norte is very special and more important to me than almost anything else you could name."

"Then it seems to me you have to make a point of not losing your temper, no matter what happens."

"I can't. If one of those idiots asks a single question that's obviously hostile, I just know I'm going to haul off and let the damn fool have it where it hurts."

"Then why don't you arrange for a 'plant' in the audience, as we say in show biz? Go to Ned Boyer, for instance, and tell him the story. When you talk to the whole committee on Friday night, Ned will already be on your side."

"Ned's a successful painter, of course, but people

around here think he's a little strange not to be a broker or a banker." Felix started to pace the ground, one hand behind his back. "The most rock-solid man of the bunch is Gordon Ulric, who's a banker, and it's my luck he's practically put himself in charge of turning El Norte into one big parking lot."

"Well, this plan of yours must be so good that it can sway him, too."

Laura said it out of almost mulish loyalty to her husband, and she was surprised when Felix suddenly whirled around and stared at her as if he'd never seen her before.

"Laura, that's absolutely right! Gordon must love El Norte every bit as much as the rest of us do. He can't be so mad that he'd want to destroy all this just because I didn't marry his daughter. He can't be."

Felix ran into the house, and the door closed behind him. Laura had been sitting with her feet under her, but now she pulled them out; on this chair, as on so many others, she could sit and not touch the ground with her feet. She allowed herself to feel a moment's happiness. Here was what she had always wanted: a good man with roots and a respected family name. She had found all of it at last, and she could only hope that she deserved it.

The main house door opened and shut again. Felix was walking out slowly.

"What happened, dear?" she asked him, sensing that she ought to feel uncomfortable, without exactly knowing why. "Did you call Gordon Ulric?"

"Oh yes, I called him," Felix said in a different tone of voice.

"Felix, what happened?"

"When he heard me on the phone he sounded like an icicle. I told him what I wanted to talk to him about, and he said that nothing I could tell him was going to make the slightest difference as far as he was concerned."

"But I *know* you're right," Laura said. "He *has* to hear you out."

"He will."

"But you practically said that there's nothing he'd like less."

"He doesn't know it yet, but he's going to hear me out whether he likes it or not."

The discomfort she had sensed changed to a flick of fear. "What do you mean?"

"Gordon's giving a dinner for some banking buddies tonight, he told me. He mentioned it as his first excuse for not wanting to see me tonight. But I'm going over to his place and needle him till he gives me ten minutes alone."

"No, you can't!" Laura had stood up now and was facing him. "Ulric will never agree if you force him to listen."

He smiled, probably having misunderstood her. "I've barged into Gordon's house a million and one times. I know the place backwards and forwards."

Laura said decisively, "I'm going with you."

"That'd be like waving a red flag at a bull." Felix grinned. "I'll handle it."

"You can't go there alone!"

He had started to turn his back to her and walk to the garage, but he was pulled up sharply. A red streak of anger showed itself between his eyebrows.

"I'm not going to lose my temper," he said carefully.

"I know you wouldn't do it on purpose," Laura said. "Felix, you have to take somebody along."

"I can't go there with you, Laura," he pointed out reasonably. "My mother is in bed by now. If past experience means anything, Harvey won't ride in a car; he hasn't done it since that famous accident of his. That leaves the maids, the cook, the handyman and the gardener. Who should I take?"

"Felix, all I know is that you shouldn't go out there by yourself." Laura reached up a hand toward him. "If I were Gordon Ulric, and I wanted to make trouble, I'd annoy you in the presence of witnesses, and when you made a lunge at me, I'd have you arrested for assault. That's what I'd do, Felix, on my word of honor."

"Gordon won't, because he'd never want to appear in court, let alone admit publicly that anybody would try to do any harm to a banker." Felix bit his lower lip briefly. "I promise you, that no matter what happens, I won't put a hand on Gordon. I give you my solemn promise, Laura. You can relax and go to bed. I haven't got the slightest idea what time I'll be back."

Laura watched his figure grow smaller. In less than five minutes, the sky-blue Rambler roared out of the Coralton garage. She watched it till there was nothing left to see but a curl of exhaust smoke, then walked into the house.

In the main wing's rumpus room, as she might have expected, Harvey sat watching television. He was sprawled across a comfortable chair and held a bag of Indian nuts.

"Have some Indian nuts? They're very good.—— This is an old movie, but if you want something else, I'll put that on, instead."

Laura didn't care. Harvey told her the name of every actor as his image appeared on the screen. He pointed to a T.V. program listing near his chair.

"This is a real old picture and most a' the actors in it are dead," he told her. "It was made the same year my mother married Mr. Page, and me and her changed our names."

"Harvey," she said with fresh urgency, "Felix has gone over to Gordon Ulric's place."

"I'll bet he took the car." A wince of pain flashed across Harvey's blandly amiable pudding face. "I won't be comfortable again till he gets back without an accident—knock on wood. I can see why you're so worried."

"I'm worried because Felix might get angry enough to hurt Gordon Ulric."

"Felix will be all right, Laura. Honest, Felix doesn't go around hitting everybody who doesn't agree with him."

"But this isn't an argument about ballet that he's having with Ulric," Laura said. "Look, Harvey, I

know you'd hate to do it; but can't you go out there for your brother's sake, in case of trouble? Just this once? I'll be glad to drive you over and wait in the car."

Harvey didn't answer that. He was galvanized by what was happening on the screen. "Look, look! Clark Gable's car is going to go over that cliff, Laura."

He suddenly leaned forward and switched the set to another channel. He was breathing with considerable difficulty, and a moment passed before he was able to look back at Laura.

"If you'd rather watch the Clark Gable picture, Laura, I'll turn back to that."

"No, that's all right." She sighed, and looked at his shaky hands. "Forget it, Harvey. Forget everything I said."

Laura waited till twelve o'clock. Then she stood up and returned to the bedroom she shared with Felix. It was a big room, and the double bed was over to one side. There was enough space for her to walk up and down without barking her shins on anything; and the noise wouldn't disturb Selina Page. She had probably taken a sleeping pill, as she generally did at eleven o'clock, and gone to bed.

Laura heard steps on the stairs at a quarter to one. She climbed into bed, picked up a book, and stared at it as if she were reading.

Felix opened the door softly. When he saw that Laura's bed light was on, he closed the door heavily, as usual, and sat down on his side of the bed to take off his shoes.

"Felix, what happened?" Laura couldn't hide the urgency in her. "Did you *do* anything?"

"For all practical purposes, I might just as well have kept you company."

He was putting his left shoe down when she saw a fresh cut across the back of one hand below the knuckle line.

"Felix, how did you get that?"

"Don't worry about it." He stood up and brought

his shoes over to the closet, where he put shoe trees inside them. He finally reached for a bathrobe and said mildly, "You keep jamming so many of your clothes into my closet that I may have to put all my things in paper bags and keep them under the bed."

"Felix, *please!*"

He smiled at her. "Well, Gordon isn't going to complain about anything in court."

"You *did* hurt him? In spite of what you promised me, Felix, you hurt him? I still can hardly believe—"

The smile disappeared. "I'll tell you exactly what happened, Laura. I went there and cornered him. I told him he was going to hear me out sooner or later, so he might as well get the whole pitch earlier. Then he could work up any answer he might want to give before I tell the whole story in public, I said. Believe me, Laura, at that point I was reasonable as hell."

" 'At that point'," she repeated tonelessly.

"We walked into his library, me and Gordon, and I gave him the whole pitch. He listened with a frosted smile on his face. You would think I had come in for a loan, and I didn't have any collateral to put up. You'd never have guessed that I was trying to get him to help me save the area where both of us have lived most of the time."

"You'll do it in spite of him," Laura said firmly. Her eyes returned to the sight of the cut on the back of his right hand. "Did you do anything to Ulric tonight, Felix? Please tell me."

"Don't be silly." He walked into the adjoining bathroom, where he generally changed into pajamas. The small space magnified his voice as he told her the rest of what had happened at Gordon Ulric's home.

"I realized that Gordon really is out to make as much trouble as he can, and he couldn't care less if he destroys dozens of other people or not. He might hesitate for a while if he were on his own, but with that jerk, Clymer, to front for him, there's no limit to what he's liable to try and do. Damn him to hell and back! At one p—"

"Felix, please don't keep me on tenterhooks," she pleaded. *"How did you get that cut?"*

"Well, at one point I got very mad at him. He was being so foolish and mean that I wasn't able to talk. My throat actually felt choked up. I made fists and I was ready to pound him into the wall, I swear. But then I remembered that I had promised you I wouldn't touch him. I got up and started to walk around the library to work off the fury inside me."

She felt a wave of relief wash over her. "You didn't hurt Ulric, after all?"

"No, I never touched him," Felix said. "What happened is simply that there was a vase on a small table and I suddenly got so mad that I picked it up and smashed it against the floor and jumped on the pieces. A small chunk of it cut me on the back of the hand, Laura, that's all. Of course I had to write out one whale of a check before I left, but it's worth it, in a way, to have made the pressure on myself a little easier."

"Never mind the check, dear," she said, settling more firmly into her half of the bed. "Things could have been a lot worse."

"What could be worse than a completely wasted trip?" Felix asked, his mind only on the key problem. "I'm right back to where I was earlier in the evening."

Not till the next day, long after Laura had awakened from her sleep of exhaustion, did she and Felix find out that his talk with Gordon Ulric hadn't been a waste of time at all—though not in a manner that either of them could have expected.

EIGHT

LAURA WAS sitting at the biggest table in what was called "the summer room," writing thank-you notes for gifts that had been received. She took a fresh piece of stationery out of the newly-delivered box and brushed a forefinger lightly along the print near the top: *Laura Page.*

She was halfway through the sixth note, when she heard the door opening back of her. Laura looked up and turned her head. Selina Page, dressed in a light gray that matched her hair, walked heavily into the room and slammed the door behind her.

Laura started to smile and make some trivial remark, but one look at the older woman's forbidding air stopped her. Selina Page walked over to a large window panel, and her figure hid most of the Coralton swimming pool from sight. She was looking across at the other large window panel, which framed a part of the rugged wilderness of the El Norte region, displaying its wild greenery and a humped wooden bridge. From here, the side of a mountain seemed as straight as an elevator shaft.

Just as Laura went back to her note-writing chore, the tip of Selina Page's cane thumped petulantly against the checker-patterned flooring.

"You must never again tell Susan to use her own judgment about whether or not to wear a uniform when we loan her out," she said abruptly. "It's important that a servant look well, and maids have no sense about that sort of thing."

Laura's right hand darted nervously, and an unnecessary line appeared on the paper. It didn't bother her that she'd have to write the letter all over again, but she felt a pang at throwing out even one sheet of the stationery with her married name on it.

"Susan is helping out with some neighbor's children this morning, as Felix wanted her to," she said. "I took it for granted, from what I've seen of Susan, that she dresses well as a rule, so I told her to use her own judgment about what to wear. Felix told me that the affair over at the Ryerson house would be very informal."

"Don't make the same error again," Selina Page said thinly. She sat down with great care, putting the cane across her thighs as if it was a schoolchild to be spanked.

"I may decide," Laura said with more ease than she felt, "to have Susan wear leotards when she waits on Felix and myself."

"It's not a laughing matter," Selina Page said firmly.

Laura caught herself just short of saying that nothing at Coralton seemed to be a laughing matter. Everybody in this house overreacted, whether it was Harvey refusing to ride in a car as long as he lived, or Felix going for somebody's throat. And now Selina Page was laying down a new commandment, as if their future depended on it.

"It's ludicrous," Laura said evenly, "but not a laughing matter."

Selina Page chose to ignore this special insurrection.

"As long as you do things correctly, we'll get along," she said, and made preparations to stand.

The phone rang before Laura could say anything in response, and she hurried into the next room. The extension had been placed on a library shelf that jutted out at what would have been eye level for most people but was just above that point for her. Laura lifted the receiver, reached over to pull one of the French provin-

cial chairs away from the Spanish table, and sat down before answering.

"Hello?"

There was a split-second pause, and then a man's voice, pitched high and sounding almost childish, asked:

"Can I talk to Mr. Page?"

"Which one?"

"Mr. Felix Page."

Before saying that Felix wasn't home, Laura asked: "Who's calling, please?"

"*I* am." The pride in his voice gave away the man's identity; Laura knew that she was talking to Oscar Clymer, and she supposed that he was disguising his voice by way of some foolish joke.

"Felix isn't home right now, Mr. Clymer," Laura said evenly. "I'll have him call you as soon as he gets back."

"Mr. *what?*" Clymer's voice had almost slipped to its natural level, but swiftly lurched upward again to the childlike tones he had adopted. "You don't know who I am and I never heard of you neither, so there. I'll call him again."

The connection was broken at the other end. Laura sighed. She was in the summer room finishing her letters, when Felix came back for lunch. He had been trying to clear his thoughts and line up the ideas properly for the presentation he'd be making tomorrow night about his plans for keeping El Norte whole. Though almost everybody he would speak before was a long-time friend, Felix was hesitant about it and wanted to get his ideas lined up as carefully as he could.

"A hard morning?" he asked cheerfully, looking down at the pile of completed letters. "As soon as I'm organized on this El Norte business, Laura, I'm taking you to Hawaii for that long-delayed honeymoon."

"I know, dear," she said quietly.

"Anything new?"

"You had a phone call from Oscar Clymer."

"From—?" Felix scowled. "What in the world does he want?"

"He wouldn't tell me. In fact, he kept insisting he wasn't Oscar Clymer, but I know better."

"Let him take a flying jump in the lake," Felix said, dismissing the matter. "What's for lunch?"

Laura said quickly, "You can't just forget it like that. Maybe Clymer wants something important."

"He probably wants to demonstrate a new gag, and he's so enthusiastic he doesn't care who he shows it to." Felix shook his head fiercely. "He's like a kid, for heaven's sake. You wouldn't take a one-year-old baby seriously, would you?"

"Foolish or not, he did phone and he is in partnership with Gordon Ulric to smash El Norte into pieces," Laura reminded him. "He may have something important to tell you."

"To hell with him! I won't have anything to do with that miserable creep."

Laura rose and took him by a hand. "Come with me, dear."

He probably didn't realize what was on Laura's mind till she stopped in front of the telephone extension in the next room. Then he drew back sharply.

"Don't try to push me around on a thing like this, Laura. Believe me, I've taken enough pushing around in my lifetime, and I don't want any of it from you."

"Darling, you know as well as I do that it's only common sense to talk with the man. You'll have to do it sooner or later. Why not get it over with, now?"

He frowned, but didn't leave the room. Laura picked up the phone and made contact with the Clymer home. Oscar Clymer answered in a few minutes.

"This is the county morgue," he boomed cheerfully. "The customer is always dead. Ha-ha!"

Felix let out a deep breath of pain and took the phone from his wife. Laura stood close to him, an ear cocked to listen. One of her hands held his free hand tenderly.

"Felix Page here. I understand you phoned me a little while ago."

"Yes, I did. Your wife is a great little recognizer of voices, I must say. I've fooled plenty of other people with that imitation of mine, but I couldn't cut any ice with her."

"I wonder if you'd tell me," Felix started carefully.

"You want to know why I called? Well, I admit I kept hoping your brother would take the phone and I could bug him a little.—Your half-brother; you know what I mean.—Actually, though, it's about business."

"I don't get that."

"Well, Gordon Ulric tells me you did some high, wide and fancy talking to him last night."

Laura felt Felix suddenly squeeze the bones of her fingers.

"What about it?"

"To tell you truth and nothing but, I wanted to know exactly what was on your mind. I've asked Gordon, but he practically foams at the mouth when your name comes into any conversation."

"Are you telling me that you want to double-cross your partner?"

"Gordon is mainly trying to work out a grudge, you know, young fellow; and it's almost entirely your own fault as far as I can tell." Clymer chuckled mildly. "What I want is nothing more or less than to find out exactly what you're going to tell the boys at Friday night's meeting, so I'll know what to say in rebuttal. That's a perfectly fair statement, I think; isn't it?"

"You should be able to get it straight from Gordon, if that's all you want."

"The point is that if your idea is really what Gordon makes it sound like, well, I wouldn't say that I might not be interested in that, too. After all, I did come out to El Norte to live, and I don't want to see the countryside loused up if there's some sensible way to stop it. If there's a trend that can't be stopped, well,

I'll take the first pick and shovel. Otherwise, who knows?"

Felix asked carefully, "This isn't one of your famous so-called practical jokes, is it?"

"Not this time."

"Because if it is," Felix started.

"Oh-oh, here comes the violence bit again."

"You can probably understand why I should be suspicious."

"Uh-huh, but not why you're such a nut about hitting into people. In my case, I'll admit, I gave your brother a hard time at the wedding, though as far as I'm concerned, he damn well had it coming to him. I think you gave me a hard time back, and with interest. I can still feel those hands of yours on my windpipe."

"I thought you'd hurt Harvey pretty badly," Felix said. "I didn't realize it was only his pride that had taken a slamming."

"Well, he hurt my pride, too, by asking me to sit out of the way and doing it so loud that nearly everybody heard it. I was next to the aisle, you know, and minding my own business; but one bad turn deserves another."

"I'll agree that a lot of unfortunate things have happened lately," Felix said. "I can come over to your place and tell you my plan in detail for saving El Norte."

"Oh no, you won't."

"Why not? You're home, aren't you?"

"For a while longer, anyhow, Page."

"Well then, what's wrong? Are you afraid Gordon Ulric has got some spies watching your every move?"

"Uh-uh," Clymer said. "What I'm afraid of is those hands of yours."

Felix was red-faced with embarrassment. "Listen here, Clymer, I don't blame you altogether for feeling that way; but believe me I won't do a thing. I'll just talk to you, tell you what my over-all plan is, and leave. That'll be it. You don't even have to tell me what you think of it."

"No deal, Page. You aren't going to talk to me here at my place. That's a guarantee."

"We can go over it right now on the phone or I can call you again at whatever time suits you."

"I can't go along with that either, Page. To tell you the truth, I like to see somebody's face when I'm talking business to him. People do lie, you know; I've done a pretty fair amount of lying, myself. When I'm looking at somebody I can tell, by and large, if I'm getting the straight story or a hosing."

"Then we have to meet in public."

"Looks like it," Clymer agreed soberly. "I'll tell you what. Do you know Amalfi's Place?"

"The cocktail lounge in town? Yes, I know it, but it isn't open till five o'clock."

"I'll meet you there at seven-thirty. There's no real rush, you know."

Felix sighed. "Seven-thirty it is, Clymer. Goodb—"

"No, wait a minute!"

"What now?"

"It just occurred to me, Page, that whether it's in public or not, you still might act up if we're sitting alone."

"I'm telling you, I won't put a hand on you. Take my word for something this one time, will you?"

"Let me finish, Page. I was going to say that your wife seems to me like a pretty level-headed woman, from having talked to her recently and having seen her a couple of times. She ought to be able to control you if she's on her toes. Bring her along."

Felix hung up without another word. He pulled his hand away from Laura's.

"It's a good thing I'll have a wet nurse with me tonight. I can't be trusted alone."

"Darling, I didn't invite myself," Laura pointed out reasonably.

"The whole idea is riciculous." Felix snorted. "Am I going to need you with me every time I go out to talk with somebody about a building? Maybe you should bring a dog collar with you tonight."

"If you tell me to stay home and not go with you, dear, I'll do that."

"You know I can't afford to have you stay home. What will I do if Clymer takes one look at me sitting there alone and walks the hell out?"

A third voice asked tautly:

"You're going to see that man Clymer?"

Laura whirled around to the door, surprised at the interruption, and glad that the talk with Felix was suspended. It was Harvey, who sometimes prowled from one room to another in search of distraction. The blandly amiable look that was generally on his thick-featured face had been cast aside; he seemed to be asking himself whether or not he should become angry because of what he'd heard.

"You know what that Clymer man did to me," Harvey said. "Made me look like a fool in front of all your friends. How can you have anything to do with him after that?"

Felix smiled gently. Laura had already noticed that he never said a sharp word to him or showed any of the tongue-tied embarrassment that generally led to violence on his part.

"You know that I've been trying to keep people from building in El Norte and turning it into another Miami Beach," Felix said patiently. "I need Clymer's help, and I can't get it if I don't talk to him."

"I should think you'd try to get help from somebody else," Harvey said mulishly.

"I would, if there were anybody else who could do a certain thing for me. Clymer is Gordon Ulric's partner in buying up El Norte real estate, but he might even switch sides if he's handled right."

Harvey put a hand to the back of his head and shook it as if he was trying to forget a bad dream. "I'll go down to the cellar and do a little tinkering, I guess. At least if a machine does something bad, you know it isn't trying to hurt you."

Felix blocked him by suddenly walking to the door

and standing with a palm outstretched. His smile made Laura realize that what he was doing must have been part of a ritual with its roots in their childhood.

"Friends, Harvey?"

There was a pause. Harvey Page looked from side to side as if he wanted to dodge the issue, but he straightened his back and moved toward his half-brother.

"Always friends," he said automatically as his part of the childhood ritual.

But he left the room without another word or even a look back at his half-brother, or at Laura.

The El Norte area was shaped like an irregular letter G, Laura noticed as they drove along the highway. She looked down at the hard and rugged beauty of the area in which she now lived, and which she was beginning to feel was a part of her.

The town into which Felix took her was located just beyond the side-bar of the G, and at least one hundred miles from Coralton. They drove past a large sign that said, WELCOME TO APOCALYPSE. The main street was a hodgepodge of shooting galleries, gypsy fortune-teller stores, bingo parlors, hot-dog stands, burlesque shows, and movie theatres. A guess-your-weight concessionaire called invitingly to them as Felix drove off the main street and into a smaller one. Felix closed his eyes tightly but briefly when he had parked the Rambler.

"What you just saw," he said, "is the opposition."

"Excuse me, dear?"

"The sort of tourist rat pit that most of El Norte could turn into if we let it happen."

"Not all tourist traps are as vulgar as this one."

"I've seen a lot that are worse," Felix said irritably. "Let's get Clymer finished and done with."

Amalfi's Place was the cocktail lounge next door to the Apocalypse Hotel. Felix escorted Laura under a wide green awning and into a cool, dimly-lit place with

tables covered with a rich red plastic material. A female pianist was playing and singing obscure songs from various Broadway musical comedies.

Felix gestured Laura to a center table. No more than half a dozen people were here, most of them gathered around the gleaming bar. Laura heard the soft sound of a drink being shaken thoroughly, and realized that the city-associated noises depressed her, after even a short time at Coralton.

The pianist finished some song or other and waited for applause that didn't come. She gazed round the room, sighed quizzically, and launched into another selection.

At half-past eight, Felix called the waiter over. The waiter was a tall fair man with a green shirt, white jacket and blue pants.

"Do you know a man named Oscar Clymer?"

"Sure I do," the waiter answered. "Whenever he comes in, he shakes up this place good."

"My wife and I were supposed to meet him here a while ago, and I wonder if he often asks people to meet him here but doesn't show up, himself."

"I never heard a' him doing that, but I'll ask Lou what he knows about it."

The waiter walked silently to the bar and came back with an envelope. Inside it was a letter on hotel stationery.

"Page: I'm sorry I can't keep the appointment tonight but one of my company's new items is part of a suit for copyright infringement and I'm having a set-to with my lawyers before tomorrow's appearance in court. Give me a buzz at home tomorrow morning. I definitely want to see you before the evening meeting at Ned Boyer's place. My best to your little lady—literally in this case, ha-ha!——Clymer."

Laura had been reading the note over Felix's right shoulder. She sighed, touched Felix comfortingly and said to him:

"I suppose we'd better go."

"One more round, Laura," he said. "I don't want

anybody to think we're at his mercy as to whether we go or stay."

"Apparently he couldn't help what happened."

"I don't believe a word in that note."

"Do you mean that you won't even give Clymer a chance to come over to our side?"

"Oscar Clymer has played a so-called joke on me for the last time." The drinks came. He paused as he raised the fresh drink nearly to his lips. "I've had too many as it is, and I've got to drive back."

There was a rubber plant against the furthest wall. Felix stood up, drink in hand, and walked over to the rubber plant. When he came back to the table, his glass was empty.

"We can't let the waiter think I'm not able to hold my liquor," he said ruefully. "As soon as you're finished with your drink, Laura, we'll go home and try to forget we got suckered into this trip."

NINE

LAURA TRIED twice to persuade Felix that he ought to get in touch with Oscar Clymer on Friday morning, but Felix refused. After lunch, he went into the library to begin typing up his presentation. He had been there for only twenty minutes when the phone rang.

Laura picked it up on an extension and heard Clymer already deep in conversation with Felix. She half-smiled to herself when she put the phone down gently, so that she would not disturb them.

She was talking to Harvey about a possible change in the electrical wiring when Felix joined them. He looked miserable at sight of Harvey sprawled comfortably on a chair in the summer room. Harvey must have noticed the look; he stood up promptly and gave an awkward smile.

"I can see that you want to be alone with Laura," he said. "Can't say I blame you."

He left the room before Felix could tell him politely that it wasn't so: politely—but not truthfully.

Felix waited till he heard Harvey's steps fading down the hallway outside the room, then pitched his voice quietly as he spoke to Laura.

"Clymer talked me into another get-together just before the meeting. This time," Felix said, "we're supposed to pick him up at his place by half past six."

"That's fine."

Felix said, "He'd better be on the level, that's all I can tell you."

In the sunset, from a distance, Clymer's house looked as if it had been constructed on the outside with expen-

sive, soft, gray wool. Clymer was waiting on the patio as Laura and Felix pulled up in the Rambler. He wore a white suit and hat, and green-colored glasses to keep dirt from getting at his contact lenses in the open air.

"Ned's house isn't too far from here and I don't mind stretching my legs after so many hours in a courtroom," he said. "What say we walk over?"

"I think I'd rather we rode."

"Uh-huh, but if you get bothered you might become so excited you'd fudge up the driving and crash us. No, thanks, Page, we'll walk."

Felix let Laura out and carefully drove the car into Clymer's garage. The heels of Laura's shoes sank part of the way into earth as she stood waiting for him. She hoped he wouldn't notice it when he came back; the sight of Laura standing almost helplessly could upset Felix and delay the coming talk until everybody's nerves were frayed.

Clymer filled the pause by talking about his major interest in life: the creating of practical jokes.

"I test every one of 'em personally," he was saying. "It gets mailed to me and I spent a couple of weeks with one that looks good, carrying it around and practically sleeping with it. My business needs a certain amount of dedication."

Felix walked hurriedly around the right side of the house to join them, both hands in his pockets as if he had to show that he hadn't stolen anything.

"What say we get started?" he asked.

The men waited for Laura to join them. They walked side by side, Clymer a few feet away as if he expected trouble. Laura kept pace as she walked next to Felix.

She was listening so carefully to the conversation that she hardly noticed the scenery, except to realize that it would have dazzled her at a different time. The wakening sun touched lush greenery and bare, rugged earth; sand that clustered in rough circular patches, like sightless eyes; and wooden bridges over deep,

sandy canyons. But she noticed it only when her attention darted from Felix to Clymer and back again.

"Even my wife hasn't heard the basic plans of what's needed to save El Norte," Felix began, "but I'll give 'em to you point by point. Number one: no widening of the highway. That's important because eventually it would destroy the view, and then only a short time would pass before we had popcorn sellers in the canyons under the bridges."

"Uh-huh," Clymer nodded. "But you have to give way on something, my friend, because the pressure against you is too strong. What are you willing for El Norte to lose?"

"That brings me to my next point," Felix said. "Number two: there should be some expansion of the El Norte State Park. After all, tourists have got a right to come out and enjoy this, too. It might be possible to develop another beach, you know, and maybe even a marina for boats."

"What about new construction? I'm half-owner of some land out here and I want to develop it."

"Number three: no new housing construction to be allowed within the limits of El Norte. It means getting some changes in the zoning laws, for a start, but I think it can be done. And it ought to put a finish once and for all to Gordon Ulric's idea of running up a project."

"Gordon started by trying to bug you, my young friend, and I really doubt if he expects to be allowed to put up big buildings in this area." Clymer rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Me, I've got a slightly different notion. What about me and Gordon constructing a number of two-story houses?"

Felix said promptly, "No!"

"You aren't thinking straight," Clymer said, gripping what looked like a rubber ball. He squeezed it as he finished speaking. Instead of resisting pressure, the "ball" crackled like paper and thinned out. Clymer rolled it back to its original shape between both hands, chuckling as he did. "I might bring this out so it looks

like a baseball, and it may not be a bad little number for my line, I think."

Felix said crisply, "We were talking about construction."

"Yes, of course." Clymer eased the phony rubber ball lovingly into a pocket. "It's possible to build a number of small houses close together in El Norte and not disturb any view."

"And after that, you put in shopping facilities to accommodate the people," Felix said so mildly that Clymer might not have heard the sarcasm. "A shopping center and everything that goes with it. The people are likely to want it, and they're entitled to a voice in their living standards. It's only reasonable. Meanwhile, El Norte goes to hell."

"You could prevent that from happening if you get more changes in the zoning laws," Clymer pointed out.

"The newcomers are likely to put on pressure to have *those* zoning laws changed," Felix snapped.

"I think that the old-timers would probably win out if it came to a fight." Clymer grinned. "What's more, the new people may not want El Norte marked up, either."

Felix said brusquely, "There's no place for another Levittown in El Norte."

"For heaven's sake, man!" Clymer gestured with a hand raised as if to heaven. "The rentals would be killing. You'd get the same rich types that you have now, only their homes would be smaller, and they'd have .less of the adjoining property.—And they'd be concentrated in a relatively small proportion of the area."

Felix said, "I know it's been done in other sections of the country, but there's got to be at least one region that's left alone."

"Maybe we can wheel ourselves a deal," Clymer said, as they reached one of the wooden bridges. "Here's what we do: you stick in that part about putting up some houses and I go along with the rest of what you want."

"I won't sell myself down the river," Felix started.

"Stop and think now," Clymer said persuasively. "I'm on the other side of the fence, and if I agree to your point of view and change sides, it's going to be quite a convincer to a lot of people at that meeting tonight. Correct?"

"Yes, if you'd agree with my whole plan and forget about new construction of small houses."

"You have to pay a price to make converts," Clymer remarked. "Why, I'd even go along with you on the subject of keeping these bridges intact, if that's what you want to do—though personally, I think they're pretty damned dangerous."

Later on, when it was literally a matter of life and death to recall correctly what had happened during the walk, Laura could close her eyes and "see" what had been going on at that very moment.

She had been walking close to Felix, who plodded ahead carefully and stubbornly. Five feet away from him and close to the end of the bridge, Oscar Clymer walked with a cheery confidence in his every step. His shoes kicked away some of the sand scattered across the bridge.

"This is a pretty damned dangerous gizmo we're walking on right now," he said, and brought a hand down flat against the wooden railing.

At that precise second, Laura heard the unmistakable sound of the first of three rapidly-fired gunshots.

Felix acted with so much speed that she wasn't able to see much more of what happened in the next minute or so. She had turned to him in concern, and he reached around with one hand to pull her toward himself and protect his body with her own. But she was able to get a glimpse past Felix to one side, where she saw that Oscar Clymer had lost his balance and had fallen against the railing.

There was a cr-rack of wood giving way reluctantly, just as Felix reached out his free hand to help Clymer. She could hear a hand scratch uselessly against cloth-

ing. Oscar Clymer shouted some words that she didn't understand. His voice became distant as she listened, until suddenly, it stopped, with the sound of something heavy striking a deposit of sand.

Laura shivered during the total silence that followed. She held Felix tightly, more grateful than ever for the warmth and comfort that his nearness provided.

Above her, his voice seemed to float gently downwards. "We'll walk to the end of the bridge. There are two thick poles there, Laura, and you'll wait next to them while I go down to see if I can do anything for Clymer. Ready?"

Laura made herself obey his wishes. Not till she stood alone between two thick and scarred old wooden poles did she realize that her man might be putting himself in danger from the unseen sniper.

Felix moved with grace and speed, allowing the sand to hurtle him downwards. Oscar Clymer lay on his back. The colored glasses he'd been wearing must have dropped off during that ghastly fall.

Felix hesitated briefly before touching Clymer, but he did it. He gripped Clymer's hands just above the wrists, then let go and set a palm down flat against the man's heart. After he raised Clymer's upper eyelids, he slowly stood up and turned away. Though Laura was crouched some twenty-five feet away, she could sense the fresh sadness in her husband.

It seemed impossible for Felix to climb from the canyon without help, but he'd probably been doing it since childhood and knew the tricks involved. He was with her in less than five minutes, his face cast down.

Laura said, "You don't have to tell me what shape Clymer is in. I can guess."

"We were just talking," Felix remarked wonderingly. "Just a few minutes ago we were in conversation, and now he's dead."

"Was he shot? I mean, did you see the bullet holes?"

"I didn't see bullet holes or blood, but he must've

been shot." Felix was getting his poise back, and he breathed almost normally. "We'll go over to Ned's house and phone the police from there."

"All right, dear."

Absently, just to keep her hands busy, Laura brushed at his dirt-marked jacket. Felix, who wasn't used to a bride's interest in his clothes, took a step away from her. He shrugged then, and smiled ruefully at her as he brushed dirt off the front of his pants. Then he walked closer to her, turned, and let Laura do the honors on the back.

"It's funny when you think of it," he said. "A man gets killed in seconds and we stand here brushing my clothes."

She judged from his voice that he wasn't angry at her for it.

"And you spend time philosophizing while somebody brushes your clothes."

"Death makes philosophers out of foolish people who stay alive," he said, and suddenly whirled around to face her. "We'll wait till it's a little darker, Laura, before we go. Ned isn't more than twenty minutes from here . . ."

It was a quarter to eight when they reached Barbara and Ned Boyer's place. Laura sat down on the piano stool in the long hall and Felix rushed to a phone.

Laura heard Barbara Boyer, who had answered the door, trying to find out from her why she looked so upset. Behind the urgent queries the hubbub of men's voices in the next room was like surf pounding a distant shore.

"Why doesn't he come in here?" one man was asking.

"And where's Oscar Clymer?" a broker whose voice Laura remembered suddenly put in. "He hasn't come yet, either, or maybe he's hiding in the closet to surprise us."

Laura shuddered. The noise of a telephone dial being worked was enough to quiet the men down. Barbara Boyer stood with her head cocked to one side and waited to hear what Felix was going to say. Everybody

in this house seemed to have sensed the importance of the call that was now being made.

"Police? This is Felix Page up in El Norte, and I want to report a dead body. I'm at the Boyer house in El Norte, and if you pick me up I can take you to the spot. . . . Yes, I know who the dead man is. His name is Oscar Clymer. . . . Somebody killed him. I'll give you all the details when you get here. . . . Yes, of course I'll wait."

Barbara Boyer winced. She was wearing an outfit with flame-red toreador pants visible under black pantaloons, along with what was supposed to look like a transparent black chiffon blouse, and the very clothes seemed to have been stretched taut in shock.

"Not again," she whispered. "Not again, Felix!"

Laura, still weak and dizzy from the impact of what she had seen happening less than half an hour ago, was still able to say sharply:

"Felix didn't do anything bad!"

Barbara Boyer's tones became more conversational. "Of course not, sweetie, if you say so."

She had automatically turned to face the alcove into which Felix had gone, and that motion gave Laura enough room to see into the part of the conversation pit that faced it. Perhaps a dozen men, all of whom she had seen at other times since the last weekend, were sitting on the orange pillows and glancing awkwardly at each other as well as toward the door. Laura could see that several men were embarrassed at sight of her, and a fresh wave of whispering arose.

The telephone receiver was dropped into its cradle, and Felix took half a dozen vigorous steps toward the conversation pit. In spite of the urgency that drove him, he stopped when he was more than halfway there, and turned to Laura.

"Are you all right, honey?"

"F-fine."

"Are you sure? No shivers and shakes?"

"Nothing I can't control for a while."

Felix's eyes darted upwards. "Barbara, I wish you'd

get a scotch-and-water for Laura. She's had a hard time coming over here."

Laura noticed that Barbara Boyer's hand was drawn back automatically as soon as Felix said something to her, as if Ned Boyer's wife wanted to avoid contact with him, even in speech.

Felix shrugged his shoulders and turned to walk into the conversation pit. Laura heard the whispering stop. Silence ruled. Except for Felix, who was in motion, there might have been nobody else inside the room.

Barbara Boyer gave Laura a pitying look and said, "I'd better get the drink if I don't want a living corpse on my hands."

She moved past the catwalk and over to the kitchen.

Without realizing how much it would hurt her, Laura stood up and moved toward her husband's side. She did it slowly because her ankles pained wickedly as soon as her feet pressed against the floor.

"Well," Felix was saying to the blank-faced men around him. He stood while the others sat. "What goes on around here? Ned, are you in charge of these Indians?"

Ned Boyer, sitting in one corner, blinked. His lips opened, but after a pause they snapped shut.

"What in hell *are* you people up to?" Felix asked more loudly than Laura would have thought he could bring himself to do in public. The cords in his neck stood out sharply. "We can save El Norte, and I've got the detailed plans right here in my pocket. That's what this meeting is about, isn't it? I was delegated to come up with a plan and I've got one. What more could you people possibly want from me?"

A white-haired man with an unlined face, a former United States Senator, suddenly cleared his throat, but said nothing. An auto executive, who commuted to Detroit by private plane and had earned millions for his company in a number of cut-throat deals, looked down at both hands folded tightly in his lap.

Laura, leaning sideways against the wall, said to her husband, "They think you did it, Felix."

"Did what? You mean that I shot Clymer? But the shots came from a distance. I wasn't even near Clymer when the shots sounded. Do you people here think that I would shoot a man?"

No answer from any of them.

Felix, gray-faced now, stepped out of the conversation pit with two bounds. He drew a number of typewritten sheets out of a breast pocket and dropped them on the checker-patterned floor.

As he turned to leave Laura looked past him and called out, "You're a pack of fools, the whole bunch of you!"

It was Felix who gestured her to be quiet. He pulled her hands into his larger ones. She felt the rough warmth in his hands before realizing how tightly he held her. With only a little more pressure he'd have been hurting her.

She said, "Let's wait outside for the police car, dear."

"Yes, of course."

As they started for the outside door, Barbara Boyer rushed toward Laura with one drink on a gilt tray. Seeing Felix at Laura's side, Barbara Boyer stopped. Laura looked hungrily at the drink, but when she knew that Barbara Boyer wouldn't take one more step toward her husband, she shook her head brusquely and walked with Felix to the door.

TEN

"Let me tell the two of you exactly where you stand," said Lieutenant Vogel, swivelling around to face them from in back of his desk.

It was early morning. The hours that had passed seemed as long as several years in confinement. Not that Laura had been confined at all. She'd had to ride with Felix and two uniformed policemen back to the scene of the crime, and wait while help was called for. A morgue ambulance had arrived finally, showing itself clearly against the horizon under a bright moon. The police car had been driven back to the town of Apocalypse to a gray building that did duty as police headquarters.

Laura had been questioned singly for a time. Not till she found herself in this wide and well-lit office, was she permitted to re-join her husband. Felix was calm, but there was a reddish spot where a pulse beat was visible in his right temple.

Behind the cluttered desk, sat Lieutenant Charles Vogel. He was a tall man, apparently in his late thirties, with only a sprinkling of gray hair at the sides of his bullet-shaped head. He seemed to have been born with no lower lip, judging from a casual glance, and was probably the only man she had seen in this vicinity whose face was untouched by the sun.

His questions had certainly been polite at the start, and his voice was soft in spite of its insistence.

"Now that you two have been questioned separately,

I wonder if we can get together and connect what we know," he bĕgan. "Mr. Page, you had been wanting an interview with Oscar Clymer for some time?"

"No, it was the other way around." Felix was forcing himself to sound patient. If the two of them had been close enough, Laura would have touched him.

"You mean that even though he had you by the short hairs, so to speak, he wanted to see *you?* Why, Mr. Page?"

"To propose a deal. He was willing to persuade Gordon Ulric to put up small houses instead of big ones, provided his plans met no opposition from me or anybody else who wants to keep El Norte pretty much the way it is."

"Did Clymer talk to Gordon Ulric about this?"

"Not as far as I know."

"Ulric himself denies any mention of it." Lieutenant Vogel's bright blue eyes probed Felix skillfully. "How does it happen, Mr. Page, that you and Ulric are enemies? The man had absolutely nothing good to say about you over the phone."

Laura forestalled Felix's rage from becoming apparent to Vogel: she asked:

"What connection does that have to Mr. Clymer's death?"

"We'll get to it," Vogel said briskly, dismissing the point with a wave of one calloused hand.

"Mr. Vogel, we've answered all your relevant questions and done it without a lawyer being present. We have nothing to hide about the murder, and I would think it's obvious that we didn't hurt Oscar Clymer in any way. I don't feel that my husband or I should cooperate any further without getting legal advice."

"Does each of you refuse to answer questions about your relationships with Gordon Ulric?"

Laura snapped, "Do you refuse to tell us why it should be important?"

"I'm an official who's doing his job," Vogel pointed out. "I don't have to accommodate you people in any way at all."

"Not unless you want information quickly," Laura remarked.

"I suppose," Vogel said, looking from husband to wife, "that the two of you figure this whole business is pretty straightforward. Isn't that right?"

Felix, weighing his words carefully, said, "I don't see why you'd have any problems clearing my wife and myself from any suspicion. Clymer was shot from a distance, and I've read very often that you people can tell from looking at a dead body whether or not the bullets hit from a distance."

"That's true, but there'd be nothing to prevent you from having shot Clymer from a distance and then saying that you were with him at the time he was shot."

"No, that can't be." Felix sat up straight, his eyes flaming with intellectual gratification. "There's another indicator, you know. Mrs. Page and myself were walking with Clymer on a bridge, and all of us made—"

Vogel suddenly smacked his hands down across the desk. "This has got to stop! We're sitting here and playing games exactly as if you two hadn't told the craziest single lie I have any knowledge of in my whole career."

The pulse beat in Felix's right temple flared sharply. His hands clenched quickly, and then slowly opened.

Laura said flatly, "You'll have to explain that."

"The only thing I have to do is make sure my job is attended to," Vogel snapped. "I'd hate to arrange it, frankly, but detaining the two of you wouldn't pose so many problems as you may think it would."

Felix rumbled heavily, "Am I 'detained', Lieutenant? Or under arrest?"

Vogel picked his words with care. "I'm the one who's asking questions, if you remember."

"You sound as if I'm not under arrest, after all, Lieutenant. In that case, my wife and I are going to leave your delightful company and go home."

Vogel said quietly, "Stay where you are, my friend,

or you really will be in a jam worse than anything you've ever known about in your life."

Felix rasped, "Let's see what happens if you try and go through with that."

He pushed his chair back, obviously expecting to get up from it.

Laura called out, "Felix, you can't do this!"

It stopped him. He inched back slowly, his hands rising in air till they were at shoulder level. He paused, then slammed both fists down against his kneecaps. He didn't wince with whatever pain he may have felt from the blow.

Laura said to the lieutenant, "I think we're entitled to know what you mean by calling us liars."

Vogel hesitated, glancing down at his cluttered desk and absently straightening some of the papers. A picture-frame had fallen over on its face, and he righted it, revealing a photograph of a buxom young woman and three sturdy children. Only by listening to his slow and even breathing was it possible to realize how tired he had become.

"Your story is that you were walking along a bridge when you heard three shots fired very quickly, and Clymer lost his balance and fell. Is that right?"

"Of course," Laura said. "You know that it's what we told you."

Vogel's eyes flickered as he moved his bullet head in Felix's direction. "Well now, Page, did you find any bullet holes on the body when you stepped down into the canyon to look at him?"

"No."

"Neither has our medical examiner," Vogel said. "The reason is that Oscar Clymer wasn't shot."

As Laura looked at Felix she saw that he was staring at her, too. He wasn't angry this time, though, but he couldn't bring himself to say a word.

Laura turned back insistently to Vogel. "But we heard the shots and we saw him lose his balance right afterwards."

"I've had some men looking in the area for bullets,

but so far they haven't found a thing." Vogel was brusque. "The story you two are telling hasn't held up."

Felix stood quickly, turned, and started to the door, then glanced around while waiting for Laura. His face was pale, she saw on turning, and his jaw jutted out with fierce and silent anger.

As she got to her feet in one graceful motion, Vogel said with surprising mildness, "I only have one more point to make, and then you can both go."

But even while he was talking, Laura hurried to join Felix. When she looked back at the lieutenant, her right hand had already found the comforting warmth of her husband's left.

Vogel noticed it, of course. "Two points, actually, I should have said. No arrest is going to be made in the Clymer killing at least till the autopsy has been finished. It should be done by tonight."

Laura said quickly, "I don't see what the autopsy can possibly prove. My husband and myself were walking on the wooden bridge with Mr. Clymer and we all made footprints while we were on it. Those prints have to show that Mr. Clymer lost his balance and that my husband didn't get close enough to him at any time to have hurt him. And you yourself say that Mr. Clymer wasn't shot."

"If that's your idea of conclusive proof . . ." Vogel started, then shook his head several times with eyes shut tightly. "After six hours at night without sleep you get so that you're not able to see too straight, let alone to think right.——I'll put it to you this way, though: When the autopsy results come along, I'll get 'em to you personally—to both of you. In the meantime, I'll have been able to talk the situation over with my bosses."

Felix opened the door halfway and stepped back to let Laura go through it in front of him.

"My second point," Vogel said, the cold and precise words stopping Laura in her tracks, "is that Mrs. Page here might be in a desperate situation."

"I?" Laura gripped her husband's hand tightly. "That doesn't make any sense, Mr. Vogel."

"Your husband is a man with a temper, Mrs. Page. A hothead. A man whose actions in the past have hurried one man's death and who has carried on pretty savagely from time to time when he doesn't get what he wants. My point is that you, of all people, should——"

Laura, disdaining to hear any more, marched through the door. But Vogel's voice, raised only slightly, carried well.

"——be careful, Mrs. Page," he said. "Your husband may get mad at you sometime, and then you'll have to fight for your life. If there's anything you should want to tell me at any time—and the sooner the better—you can always reach me at this offi—"

Laura and Felix were crossing the large old-fashioned anteroom by the time Vogel's crisp voice no longer seemed to be tracking them. Felix's steps rang in her ears as he led the way outside. As she looked at his big and brawny back, Laura told herself that she had never loved her husband as much as she did now.

It was late Saturday morning when they reached home in the car that Felix had taken back from Oscar Clymer's garage with police permission. Laura promptly went up to their bedroom to get herself ready for what she hoped would be a few hours sleep at the very least. As she was closing the windows, she heard Felix talking urgently to someone, probably his mother. She couldn't make out any of his words.

But Selina Page's tones were clear and firm as she said, "The first thing you should have done was to get in touch with a lawyer."

Felix said something else to her.

"You're not automatically guilty because you get in touch with a lawyer," Selina Page told him with her usual firmness. "Next time—if there should be a next time—don't be ashamed to call a lawyer first and let him take charge of your problems with the police force."

Felix joined her in the bedroom less than ten minutes afterward. He muttered for a while that he'd probably never be able to get any sleep again for as long as he lived, but not long after he turned away from her in bed, he was sleeping like a baby. Laura, trying to relax with a night mask over her eyes, lay flat on her back for several hours.

A bath and a light snack at two-thirty did very little to help her. She was daubing a pat of butter across her toast when she reminded herself about the autopsy that was being done (or had it been finished by now?) on what was left of Oscar Clymer. Felix stopped wolfing down a couple of soft-boiled eggs long enough to ask her if anything was wrong.

"I'm all right," Laura said with more ease than she felt. "Don't worry about me."

Felix went into the library after his meal and tried to make plans for the future of what he was calling "The El Norte Project." Selina Page was overseeing preparations for the night's dinner and issuing orders to the cook and to Susan, the maid. Harvey sat with Laura in the living room and talked about his latest achievement in tinkering with machines.

"I took the special receiver apart to see how it works," he was saying eagerly. "It's really a smart piece of goods. Let me tell you what it's supposed to do. Say that I'm carrying it and I'm out of reach of a telephone and you need something from me and you want to get in touch. So what do you do? Simple. You dial a special number on your nearest telephone, and a minute later, this thing I carry starts to buzz like fury. That's when I go to the phone and call you, and you tell me what you want from me. Isn't that simple?"

His heavy features glowed when he mentioned the simplicity of the idea. There wasn't anything else on his mind, obviously, except to entertain Laura for a few moments; and she doubted if he cared that Oscar Clymer was dead by violence.

"Excuse me," she said. "There's something I have to attend to."

Harvey, with his usual politeness, stood up as she left. At the door, Laura almost tripped over a chocolate-brown bulldog, officially named Walter Gropius, but known to the Pages as Gropey.

Laura hurried upstairs to bathe her temples with cologne and try to get some sleep before what was supposed to be a dinner with two very special guests. . . .

"I understand you've been having a hard time lately, Felix," Jack Noland said. "Actually, there's only one thing you can do about it."

"Give up?" Felix asked, smiling.

"Certainly not."

They were having dinner at the refectory table in the dining room. Selina Page sat at one end, and Harvey faced her. Laura and Felix had been placed at one side of the table; Jack Noland, with his wife, at the other.

Jack Noland was an oil company executive who lived in El Norte when he wasn't in the Middle East, on one of his frequent trips to various oil-rich countries. His stories about the high living of certain sheiks in contrast to the near starvation of their people, were told well and entertainingly, but with an underlying seriousness that made his own feelings clear. He was sensible enough not to try to be funny about such serious matters, and to draw the line sharply in his conversation. He had refused to involve himself with the other community members of El Norte who had sent Felix to Coventry, and had practically invited himself and his wife to dinner on this night after they settled themselves in El Norte again for another few weeks. He was a tall, dark-haired man in his mid-thirties, with a sharp nose, thin lips, and skin that reminded Laura of a tobacco pouch that Felix kept in the library.

His wife, Evelyn, generally went with him on his trips, although her presence on them made for a few problems, over and above the ordinary ones. Evelyn Noland was Jewish, and insisted on being truthful about it on all the forms that she was asked to fill out.

As a result, she would occasionally find herself being treated as if she were a suspected spy for the State of Israel. She was a tall and bright-eyed woman, with hair the same color as Gropey-the-bulldog's skin. She seemed to enjoy her husband's company, listening to him as if she'd never before heard the particular story he was telling. It was easy to see that Evelyn and her husband were not only man and wife, but good friends as well.

Felix, in the pause between the appetizer and soup courses, said pleasantly, "If there's only one thing I can do to get my way in this El Norte project of mine, Jack, you've got to tell me what it is."

"Fight," Jack Noland said tersely.

"Not literally," Selina Page put in. She was dressed in electric blue, and the color gave her aging skin a rosy cast. "He's tried, and you can believe me when I say that it doesn't work."

"Listen to me," Jack Noland said. "The State Highway Commission wants to widen Florida Three; fight them. Go down to their hearings in Jacksonville and lay it on the line once and for all."

"Do you mean that I should go myself?" Felix was red-faced with embarrassment and thoughtful at the same time. "The people here wouldn't connect themselves with anything I say or do, now that Oscar Clymer's murder apparently hangs over my head."

"They're not organized, though. The so-called group to save El Norte has disintegrated. There isn't anybody who's part of it and can come up with an idea. Someone has got to step forward if any idea is to be carried out."

"There'd be a lot of publicity." Felix frowned down at the table. "What'll I do if one of the highway commissioners asks me something like, 'Aren't you the man who killed two people in arguments about El Norte's future?' I'll sure as the devil hit the ceiling again, Jack."

Selina Page rapped the table decisively with a closed fist. "Tell the truth and shame the devil, Felix. That's

what my mother used to say to me, and it's still good advice."

"Do you really think I could manage thi—"

The door was opened by Susan. Her hands were empty. Mrs. Page glared at her. Susan ignored the glare and said, "Beg pardon, but there's a gentleman named Vogel in the living room."

Felix, gray-faced under his tan, said, "The police lieutenant!"

Mrs. Page ordered crisply, "Tell him to wait."

Susan nodded, gave a half-curtsey and left. Felix pushed back his chair, but Selina Page gestured sharply at him to stay in place.

"If he wants to see you, that's his problem," she said. "We're eating, and this is our home."

Felix glanced from his mother to the door and then back to the table, having decided against risking trouble with his mother on top of every other problem he had to deal with.

Selina Page broke the silence by turning to Jack Noland and saying, "Tell us a story about one of those sheiks you're always visiting, and make it a funny one."

Jack Noland was obliging her when a knock came softly from the door. Noland paused in his story at the sound, but resumed it immediately. Selina Page whirled around furiously toward the opening door.

Lieutenant Charles Vogel stood outlined against the harsh light of the hallway. He worked the palm of a hand along the top of his bullet head as he stepped into the room. His eyes looked sharper and more alert than in the morning, and he seemed perfectly at ease. He was coatless, and wore a business suit with a white shirt and tie. Except for the stiff way he held his back, he might have been at home.

"I suppose you didn't get the message that I was here," he said, seeing Felix and Laura at the table and talking to them. "I promised to let you know personally about the autopsy report, and that's what I came to do."

Selina Page said rigidly, "Introduce me, Felix, to this stranger in our dining room."

"Mother, this is Lieutenant Vogel."

"Are you aware," Selina Page said, drawing herself up, "that you've chosen to interrupt a private family dinner and charge in as though this was a den of criminals?"

"I'm here to pay off a promise, and to give your son a sort of a warning."

"My son needs no warnings from you," Selina Page said flatly. "Your impertinence will be reported, I can assure you, to higher authority in the police force."

"One of the reasons I'm here, ma'am, is that a higher authority told me to come and not drag your son and daughter-in-law down to headquarters."

"Were you told to behave like a herd of elephants?"

"Ma'am, I've put in a hard day's work, and I want to go home as soon as possible and watch T.V. for a few hours. I don't want to wait around till somebody gets ready to grant me an audience."

"Your personal desires are of no interest to me," Selina Page snapped, turning away.

A steely glint appeared in Vogel's sharp eyes.

Laura, seeing it, said, "Suppose Felix and the lieutenant go into one of the salons to have their talk."

"No." Selina Page saw her maid at the door. "Susan, I want you to telephone Mr. Gayley, the attorney, and ask him to come over to Coralton soon as possible."

Susan nodded as cheerfully as if she'd been told to bring an additional item to the table. She finished serving the soup course and then withdrew swiftly.

Vogel stood against the wall, not far from the Vermeer that Laura had grown to admire. He made a point of leaning one shoulder against the wall and crossing his legs.

Laura asked gently, "Are you here to put my husband or myself under arrest?"

Vogel shook his head.

"Do you want to ask more questions?"

"Not right now," Vogel said. "We covered the

ground pretty carefully when you and Mr. Page were in my office last night and early this morning."

"And *we* didn't have to wait at all," Laura murmured.

Felix was standing up as she finished. "Let's go into a salon and get it over with."

His mother's voice rang out. "I have sent for Mr. Gayley, the attorney, to join you."

It was Jack Noland who said gently, "If that's Ted Gayley you mean—and I suppose it is—he couldn't stop the lieutenant from pulling a fast one. Ted is a corporation lawyer, and he knows as much about criminal law as he knows about putting up one of the office buildings that Felix designs."

Felix was on his way through the door while Jack Noland held Selina Page's attention. It was too late for the older woman to interfere when she realized that he had left the room.

At the door, Vogel looked around long enough to catch Laura's eye, which he managed to do as soon as Felix's back was out of her sight.

"Won't you join us, please?" he asked. "For the sake of completeness, you might say."

Laura nearly jumped up from her seat in her rush to be with her husband.

Vogel added lightly, "And to keep you from sitting on pins and needles, of course."

She said gratefully, "Thank you very much for that, Lieutenant."

Selina Page managed to give one additional order. "Use the West room," she called out.

Felix had obviously heard her because he led the way into a room that neither he nor Laura especially liked. It was much too elaborate to please either of them.

"This is like a museum," Vogel said, looking around with open-mouthed admiration. "My wife would give a fortune to even see a place like this."

"You'll have to describe it carefully," Laura said, doing her best to give at least one small favor for a larger one. "The Italian wall painting goes back to the

Seventeenth Century, I think. That's a Portuguese cabinet over there with a harp design on each door. Above it is a Louis Fifteenth carved panel."

"I'll remember all that to tell my wife," Vogel said approvingly. "She reams me one if I go into an expensive house and don't give her a report on the furnishings afterwards. But worst of all, she never likes what I tell her. My inspector doesn't raise half as much hell about my work reports as she does about this."

From his position in the middle of the room, Felix glowered at the lieutenant.

"Well?" he asked.

"It isn't too well," Vogel answered in a more business-like voice. "Not from your point of view, I mean."

"Speak your piece."

"Can I use one of these chairs? I was on a raid today, and that sort of thing takes it out of a man." Vogel sat down heavily on a backless orange chair, but Laura noticed that his eyes hadn't left Felix at all. "The bad news is that no bullets were found in Oscar Clymer's body or on the bridge or in the canyon area. Your story simply doesn't hold up."

While Felix glared silently, Laura asked:

"How did Mr. Clymer die?"

"His neck was broken."

Laura shuddered, and the memory of Oscar Clymer chuckling gleefully at a practical joke item as he took it out of a pocket on that last walk was painful and vivid before her.

"I assume, then, that it happened when Mr. Clymer fell into the canyon."

"That's what I assume, too, but the stories you people have told make it necessary for the investigation to continue."

"My husband and I have only told one story, and that one happens to be the truth."

"Three shots were fired, and Clymer fell against the bridge railing, so he broke it and dropped into the canyon," Vogel said flatly. "Well, I can't deny at this stage that what you two have said is remotely possible.

But something else is possible, too. I can think of at least one variation on your stories that could make sense but isn't nearly as flattering to Mr. Page."

Laura judged that Felix was in control of his temper.

"We'd like to hear that story, Lieutenant," she said. "That is, if you don't object to telling it."

"Not at all," Vogel said. "In fact, it's a big stumbling block right now, like I just told you. If we knew the right or wrong of it, the case would be broken."

He drew out a slim pipe, glanced affectionately at it and then looked warily at the surroundings. He sighed, shook his head, and put the pipe back in a breast pocket.

"It's simple enough," he added. "There was some noise, presumably, and Clymer lost his balance and toppled over. The two of you ran to the end of the bridge and Mr. Page eased himself down the canyon to see if anything was wrong with Clymer. Now we know that Clymer had been giving Mr. Page a hard time and that Mr. Page's temper isn't the most accommodating in this world. Seeing his enemy lying there, maybe stunned, it's possible that—"

Laura called out in order to stop the lieutenant from finishing what he was going to say, but Vogel went on exactly as if there'd been no disturbance.

"—Mr. Page broke Clymer's neck then and there."

"You're completely wrong, Lieutenant. You couldn't be more wrong."

"Prove it and I'll agree with you."

"My husband's temper only shows itself against people who are offending him at the moment. Felix would never hurt anybody who was already at a disadvantage."

"That isn't proof," Vogel said. "But we do know that Clymer had been giving your husband a rough time and was in a position to block him from having what he wanted most of all."

"I would think," Laura said coolly, "that your medi-

cal examiner could tell the difference between one cause of death and another."

"Doctors aren't miracle men," Vogel remarked, obviously hating to admit that some police jobs couldn't be done to perfection no matter how hard the worker tried. "Clymer could have been in bad shape to start with, and Mr. Page give him—if you know what I mean—the finishing touch."

"It's nonsense!" Laura snapped.

Felix said too loudly, "Just a minute!"

He coughed and cleared his throat when Vogel looked across inquiringly at him.

"Do you ever expect to find out how it happened?"

"Our doctor is going to keep trying, and even consult with some specialists."

"How long do you suppose it'll take before I'm out from under all blame?"

"Depending on the results, of course," Vogel pursed his lips, "I would say a week or two. Our man might even need to travel around to do his consulting."

Felix rubbed both hands fiercely against his thighs. "And until then everybody in El Norte is going to be sure that I gave Clymer 'the finishing touch', in that charming phrase of yours."

"You're not being put under arrest, and that ought to be of some help."

Felix laughed mirthlessly, palms still digging at his thighs. "I can go to Jacksonville and talk to the Highway Commission people till my tongue turns blue, but coming from a man who may have killed somebody on account of what he's saying, it'll amount to nothing. All the same, what else can I possibly do except go there and try to talk to them?"

Vogel had been halfway to the door. Now he whirled around on Felix.

"I'm sorry, but you won't be going near Jacksonville for the next couple of weeks, at least."

Felix made a pair of fists this time and took a step forward. He halted himself before Laura could call out.

They stood facing the lieutenant, Laura with a hand automatically extended before her husband's midriff.

"This is simply a matter of routine," Vogel added tiredly. "During the investigation, me and my superiors want you to stay in easy distance of Apocalypse. That's vital to us, Mr. Page, and there isn't a lawyer anywhere who could change our minds about it. I nearly forgot to say so, dammit, but that's the 'sort of warning' I came to give you. If you're tempted to run out for even a day, consider it as a real warning."

Vogel saw Felix's fists clenching and opening. He glanced at Laura.

"I still think your husband is going to get sore at you one of these days, Mrs. Page," he said. "And he won't be as self-controlled with you as he is with me."

Vogel closed the door efficiently as he walked out of the room.

ELEVEN

"I'm surprised that the architect wasn't garrotted, or whatever else they do to criminals in Moslem countries," Jack Noland was saying smoothly when Laura and Felix rejoined the diners. "This fellow has never been the same since the authorities complained to him for installing a row of toilets that faced Mecca."

As they entered, Selina Page's smile froze and her jaw was thrust out as if she were stepping vigorously on something underfoot.

"We waited for you," she said. "Now tell us what happened, Felix."

"Yes," Harvey Page agreed, and the polite boredom on his face disappeared. "What did that policeman say?"

Laura stopped herself from suggesting that the conversation not be held until the meal was finished, but she realized that there wasn't anything else on Felix's mind, and he'd have a hard time talking about trivial subjects.

"The autopsy results aren't conclusive, and it's still possible, according to Lieutenant Vogel, that I killed Oscar Clymer by breaking his neck while he was unconscious down in the canyon."

Evelyn Noland winced but said easily, "As long as you aren't under arrest, I would think that there's no serious trouble."

"The trouble is that everybody in and around El Norte is going to be convinced that I'm a murderer

who's loose only because he has a lot of money and influence."

Harvey said loyally, "If anybody ever says that, and I'm listening, I'll jam his teeth down his throat."

Selina Page said, straight-faced, "Of course you'll overhear some stranger while you're on one of those numerous trips you make into Apocalypse."

Harvey decided that it was a joke, after all. He smiled.

The main course was finally brought in, and Laura noticed that the smell of roast chicken warmed the entire room. She had expected that one of the glories of wealth would be an unawareness of such necessary externals as the scent of food before it was eaten. Apparently, she had been wrong. The aroma reminded her distinctly of one of the foster homes in which she had lived, and for a second of heartache, she *knew* that she was going to be given the leg or neck. But the heartache left, sped on its way by Jack Noland's smooth, lulling voice.

"You're not under arrest, Felix, as Ev says; so we might as well all carry on with business as usual."

"Such as hearing about the Middle East?"

"Accra, in fact," Noland said imperturbably. "I was telling your mother and Harvey about an architect I know who was hired to put up a hospital there. First off, the government people got sore at my friend because the building didn't start to go up on the day after the plans were approved. Then they told him they didn't want a building that looked European—Heaven forbid!—or native——No 'quaintness', even though it might be functional in that climate. Then the bureaucrats wanted a cut of the funds before construction could start, and the local Communists insisted that the unskilled laborers wouldn't learn even the simplified techniques that are necessary in Moslem or African countries. And after that business with the toilets, some major changes had to be made. Then the government decided that women and men weren't to use the same building, and a lot of persuasion was required. Right

after that, the government was out of office, and my friend is still waiting for permission from the new group to go ahead with the building."

Selina Page said determinedly, "I know that Felix prefers even the stupid clients he usually deals with to the sort of people he'd meet in wherever-it-is. I'm sure that Felix couldn't be tempted to go abroad."

Nothing else could probably have made Felix smile at the moment. "Mother, I promise you that I won't even be going to Jacksonville to make my pitch to the State Commission about keeping El Norte whole. At least, probably not till it's too late."

Jack said, "You'd be making a mistake not to go and tell them what you want and why. The least you can do is to put it on the record."

"Even if I could get up the nerve to make my pitch at a public hearing, I still couldn't do it." Felix looked down shamefacedly at the table. "I'm not allowed to leave this area till the Clymer case is settled."

Selina Page shook her head. "As soon as I get on the phone to Inspector Butcher, that man who was here instead of him will make no more trouble."

"Vogel told me and Laura that his superiors agreed with what he was doing." Felix hit his fists lightly against the table top.

Jack and Evelyn Noland looked at each other, holding a silent conversation, in the manner of long-wed people who understand each other's reactions without having to talk about them.

Laura had put out her hands to keep Felix from possibly hurting himself against the table top, but she couldn't halt the flow of energy and pressure within him. A reddish glow was seeping upwards past the second knuckle of each finger.

In hopes of stopping him once and for all, Laura said encouragingly:

"Darling, I'm sure that the problem can be solved, and your not being allowed to go to Jacksonville doesn't finish everything for us."

Felix's fists hit the table top once more, viciously

this time. Laura noticed that one of his fists had come down directly across the space taken by her reflected image, and she wished she hadn't seen him do that.

"You've never really wanted to make an appeal in public, Felix, and this way you'll have more time to get things done from here and persuade others around to your—our—way of thinking. El Norte can't possibly ignore what you say, "Fel—" Felix suddenly shouted:

"For heaven's sake, Laura, shut up!"

Laura fell back as if she had been assaulted, remembering in spite of herself that Lieutenant Vogel had just been talking to her about Felix's bad temper.

"I'm sick of being blocked on all sides," Felix said bitterly. "And on top of everything else, my wife tells me that it's all really fine and dandy."

Laura started to shake her head, but decided quickly against distracting him by the motion.

"I never said that, Felix," she insisted softly.

"Do you think that the police aren't in cahoots with those vultures who are going to take this section over? Do you suppose that Gordon Ulric isn't putting pressure on them to keep me from the hearing, now that there's a convenient excuse?"

From what seemed like a long distance, she heard Jack Noland's hypnotically soothing voice. "Felix, you're a long-time friend of mine; but I've been on good terms with Gordon Ulric for some years now too, and I can't believe he'd do anything like that. I'm not sure if he even wants to go through with this business about putting up houses in El Norte, but I certainly can't see him being so underhanded as you think."

"Then why don't you go to him and tell him?" Felix jumped up as if he'd been stung. "It's the last straw, to sit having dinner here at Coralton and listen to somebody defending Gordon Ulric."

Noland said, "I'm sure we can settle this whole discussion in a reasonable way, Felix. Sit down and let's not lose our heads."

"The hell with you and Gordon Ulric, both!"

He was glaring ferociously across the table at No-

land. Laura stood and faced him to one side and against the table, a gentle smile on her lips.

"Darling, we have to be calm about something as important to all of us as—"

She suddenly felt what seemed like an earthquake against her left cheek. Her head bounced down on top of her right shoulder, almost as if it were a rubber ball in a child's game, and she felt for a moment as if she were the collapsible rubber ball that Oscar Clymer had been squeezing shortly before his death.——Shortly before his neck had been broken, maybe—Lieutenant Vogel said—by a pair of human hands.——But she'd never believe that. Never.

The side of her face stung as she raised her head. Drops of moisture formed across her eyelids and trembled on their fragile perch.

A chair scraped back against flooring from the other side of the table. Jack Noland said with finality:

"Selina, I'm afraid that my wife and I will have to be going."

"I'm sorry you have to leave so early." Selina Page spoke the polite words in a mechanical way, her right hand groping for the crook of her cane.

"One other thing, Selina. Please tell your son that I had been about to volunteer my own time to go down to that committee hearing in Jacksonville and put Felix's plans before it. If I'm not mistaken, I would have been pretty persuasive."

It pulled Laura up short. She knew that the man would have done Felix's bidding as well as was humanly possible.

"You have to do it!", she said.

Harvey suddenly laughed, as if all tensions had left the dining room. "Jack, that's a wonderful idea. You could talk a Wooden Indian into giving up his feathers. We're absolutely all set, Jack. You're going down to Jacksonville, and you and Felix are friends again."

"Things don't work out so simply," Jack Noland said in a gentle voice. "I'm not going to any hearings at all."

Laura put in, "But you live in El Norte, too, just like we do. If you let the hucksters take over, you'll be living in the same difficult conditions as we will."

"That's true, Laura," Jack Noland admitted, "but after spending a little time with your husband, in this generous and forgiving mood of his, you simply stop caring."

Felix hit the table top with his fists twice more, instead of shouting at him to leave the house.

Jack Noland and his wife made a point of thanking Selina Page for the hospitality, of telling Laura that they were glad to meet her, of saying that Harvey looked better than ever and that he'd manufacture a Frankenstein monster one of these days with all that tinkering around of his. They left slowly and with unhurried steps, as if nothing were wrong, and they had just finished a pleasant, rewarding meal.

Harvey broke the silence that followed, saying cheerfully, "I hope we'll see them again soon. Jack is a very funny guy, a real joker."

"Be quiet, Harvey," Selina Page said.

Laura didn't realize how much of a strain she'd been under till she was alone again with Felix and his family. Her breathing was harsh and irregular. She knew she wouldn't embarrass her husband in front of the others, so she said quietly:

"I'm going upstairs."

Harvey must have decided that he'd been still for a long enough time to satisfy his mother. As Laura reached the door he couldn't help asking:

"Why don't you two lovebirds stop being unfriendly too, and kiss and make up instead?"

Selina Page commanded, "Don't think about it, Harvey."

Laura shut the door on them.

TWELVE

Laura had taken her pajamas, bathrobe, and some overnight supplies to the bedroom she had originally been given when Felix first brought her to Coralton, the out-of-the-way room with the round bed. She had disliked that bed from the start; her idea of a bed was one of the conventional types with a long side flat against a wall. She had slept against a wall since childhood, telling herself, when she was very young, that nobody was ever going to push her through that wall and onto the other side.

She had tried to keep herself from thinking about what had happened between her and Felix, but such an attitude could not be held to for a long time. If it were not for the problem of getting to the town of Apocalypse, she'd have spent the night there; and provided she would have been able to leave the house without Selina Page's knowledge.

Felix's mother had probably given her son orders to let Laura stay by herself for the night, to let her stew. And she had probably told Felix to realize at last that Laura was an undependable girl with no true sense of belonging, with no true perception of a family unit, with no feeling for the continuity of Coralton's traditions or those of El Norte.

Laura had resigned herself to a quiet night, and it was disturbing to hear a series of hesitant raps at the door. She recognized the person in back of those soft sounds, but wouldn't take refuge in silence.

"Felix?"

"Let me in."

Laura went to the door. Felix had been drinking to get up his courage. The top button of his shirt had popped open, and his clip-on bow tie was tilted. He looked away from Laura in spite of the fact that he had come to talk to her.

He came in awkwardly as she stepped to one side, and the hard chair he chose creaked when he sat down on it with a thump.

"Well, Laura?" he asked slowly. "Let me hear it."

"There's nothing I want to say."

"Don't you even want to tell me that you hate me, or that I'm ungrateful, or no good? Don't you want to get that stuff over with?"

Laura recognized the sort of reproach that Selina Page must have made to Felix when his will was in conflict with hers. She gave him a pitying glance, but he was looking intently at a point in back of her and didn't see it.

"I don't hate you, Felix, and I don't think you're ungrateful or useless."

"What then?" He looked startled. "Are you going to suffer in silence? Do you happen to be one of those girls who doesn't talk at all when she gets mad?"

"When I'm mad, I work it out by shouting and not by violence."

"All right, I suppose I had that coming."

"I wasn't trying to needle you, Felix. I was just making a statement of fact."

He said quietly, "I'd have brought a gift along, but there are no stores nearby. And a gift wouldn't really change anything. I got so mad I could hardly talk, and I gave you a smack. It was the last thing in the world I really wanted to do, but I just couldn't help it. This whole El Norte business brings out my blind side, and I hit out at anybody who stands in my way. I've never been like that before, and I'm sure it won't happen with any other part of my life. But it does happen in this situation."

"And it will keep happening," Laura said. "I know

it will, if we have any more disagreements about your part in keeping El Norte intact."

"Laura, I won't let myself touch you again—that way."

"Can you help it?"

"Of course I—" He looked down at his hands, folding them in his lap. "I'd do my best."

"I know you would," Laura agreed. "I just don't think that your best is likely to be particularly effective in your state of mind, now."

"Look, Laura, I've got a suggestion to make. I didn't want to say this, but for your sake I suppose I ought to. How would it be if you moved away for a few weeks? I mean, if you took a place at the Apocalypse Hotel and waited till this business about destroying El Norte or leaving it alone is settled once and for all. I know it won't take too long, and there has to be some indication from the State Commission very soon. We can see how the wind is blowing and take the right steps afterwards."

He waited, eyes downcast. Laura knew what it had cost him to make a suggestion like that. For her to run away even for a short time would be a public admission that her husband was not a stable man emotionally. It would be a confirmation of the same point to Felix himself. That knowledge could be like a velvet prod, soft and even comfortable to the touch, but it could push a man toward the edge of his endurance.

"No," she said. "I won't go along with that offer of yours."

"You don't want—" He swallowed hastily. "Do you want a divorce?"

"Certainly not."

His eyes fastened on her, letting her know that he couldn't bring himself to put into words his anguish and confusion.

"If I walked out on you during a crisis, I'd be a very bad wife," she said finally. "You'd deserve to get a divorce, Felix."

"I see." He nodded. "You want us to be under the same roof, but living apart."

"For tonight, at least," she said. "I think I should be alone for a few more hours."

He stood up quickly and turned to go, not wanting to hurt Laura by intruding on her privacy for as much as another moment.

He was so anxious to oblige her that it was Laura who said first:

"Good night, dear."

"Oh." He looked back, shamefaced, then hesitated and said, "Good night, dear. Bless you and good night."

He closed the door softly.

Laura cried herself to sleep.

She never knew how Sunday passed for her. There was the visit to El Norte's old church, where she felt that a number of people were looking her up and down. There were the short talks, later on, with many near-strangers, whom she had met once or twice. There was the problem of leaving church so as to avoid bumping into Gordon Ulric and his lovely red-haired daughter, Janice, the girl whom Felix had been expected to marry.

And then came the long afternoon in which Laura sat around listlessly while Selina Page knitted, stopping long enough to write a furious letter to the editor of the *El Norte Beacon* about a recent editorial. The letter didn't actually say that there was a disagreement in points of view, but told "the truth," for Selina Page wrote on the assumption that no disagreement with her opinion was possible.

Felix had gone into Apocalypse with a lawyer, hoping to persuade Lieutenant Vogel's superiors against preventing him from going to Jacksonville to make an appearance in front of the State Highway Commission. Felix did very little talking, so he couldn't blame himself when the discussions showed no results.

Harvey had taken one look at the dismal faces around him and descended to the basement for another session of tinkering. Only when he mentioned it casually, did Laura find out that he already had several patents in his name for minor, but mildly profitable devices.

Dinner would have been an impossible meal if it were not for Harvey, who talked about the stereo set he was working on during his sessions in the cellar. Felix asked enough questions to make his half-brother feel proud as he explained the mechanics of it.

Selina Page left Coralton in the evening with the handyman, who drove her to a meeting in town. It seemed that she was on a fund-raising committee to plant more trees along the main street of Apocalypse, and a meeting was to be held at the hotel. Laura would have turned down a chance to keep her mother-in-law company, but she'd have liked to be asked about going along.

At night she moved back into the room she shared with Felix, and admitted to herself that she was happy to be with him again. She admitted it to Felix, later on. But by Monday afternoon, the nature of her troubles had changed for the worse.

Promptly at half-past eleven each morning, a U.S. Post Office truck drove up to the entrance at Coralton and a mailman deposited the day's mail in a tiny bundle. Susan took the letters from him and brought them to Felix. Then Felix put each mailing piece on the hall table, and if several items were addressed to the same person, they would be clipped together. That was the general routine, day in and day out; and Felix had once told Laura that he could remember his father hitting him brutally for disturbing the mail on the hall table of those years.

"When Harvey did the same thing, he was let go," Felix had continued ruefully. "Things were a lot easier for Harvey because he was adopted by my father."

Laura assumed that the morning routine was being followed placidly as usual. She herself had been prac-

ticing tennis volleys on the handball court. The exercise gave her a chance to work off her own tensions as well as improving her skill; and her forehand was becoming reasonably dependable, if nowhere near perfect. Harvey had promised to play with her tomorrow morning, so that she'd be able to judge how much she had accomplished at this session.

She heard running footsteps coming toward her just as she was putting the tennis balls into the long narrow can provided for them. Laura stopped what she was doing and shook her head back and forth to make sure that the bright blonde hair was behaving.

Felix appeared, Harvey running half a dozen feet in back of him. Neither man was dressed for tennis, and their shoes clattered outrageously on striking the surface of the court. There was an opened letter in Felix's hand, and his face was a deeper shade of red than it might have become after a little exercise. The coloring warned Laura that something important had come up.

"This," he said, pushing it out at her. "For you. Just came."

"You didn't have to run out with it, dear, did you?" Harvey said uncomfortably, "He wanted to."

She took the letter from Felix, but looked at her husband's face while doing it. Felix pushed his jaw in and out as a way of forcing control on himself.

"I thought it was addressed to Mr. Page, so I opened it. When I looked at the envelope again I saw that the letter 's' had been written after the M and r, but it was too faint to be seen right away. I don't think I'd have read much more of it, the letter I mean, but I saw the stationery and I know Gordon Ulric's handwriting."

Laura said, "Gordon Ulric can't be writing to me!"

"Why don't you see what he says?" Felix asked tautly, "or do you know already?"

The last words seemed to have come out against his will. He drew a deep breath and turned from her. It was Harvey who put out a hand gently, to restrain Felix from leaving the tennis court.

The letter trembled in Laura's hands. Gordon Ulric's name had been printed in raised script on top of the paper that was almost as hard to the touch as cardboard.

Dear Laura:

This is to thank you for all the help you've given me in my fight to make El Norte a place where many people can live and in doing so to open up its riches to those who haven't been so lucky as to be born here.

I realize that you can help in only a stealthy way, a little at a time, and that Felix has to think that you're *encouraging* him in doing exactly the opposite of what both of us want. I can only congratulate you on the smoothness with which you've been doing it. Your reward will certainly come when you see for yourself what a fine area our little stretch of country can turn into as soon as it is more thickly populated.

Janice, my daughter, sends her regards and asks me to say that she misjudged you on the night that you two met.

Sincerely,
Gordon

N.B. I'm not putting my name on the outside for obvious reasons, and I know that private mail is treated with respect up at Coralton. But I can't resist sending you my best personal thanks.

Laura was surprised to hear now calm she sounded in asking Felix:

"Do you believe it?"

"I don't know what else I can do."

"You might try holding off any judgment till you asked me."

"I'm asking you now."

"But you've made up your mind already." Laura let the note drop to the court floor. "There doesn't appear

to be any use in talking about it and raising your blood pressure no matter what I say."

"Laura!" His voice was suddenly not as clear as it had been. A dull flush appeared at the base of his neck and travelled upwards.

"All right, dear, I suppose we do have to talk about it." She nodded. "I assume that Evelyn and Jack Noland told Gordon Ulric about what happened here on Saturday night. They probably told him how they felt about it, too. The combination of factors put an idea into Ulric's head, and he wrote that—that thing."

Felix winced at her mention of Saturday night and took a glance down at his right hand as if it had betrayed him not too long ago.

"What's the dinner got to do with it?" he demanded. "I mean, the thing that happened during dinner."

"Gordon Ulric probably figures that if he can split us up, the emotional pressure of a quick marriage and separation will take your mind off what he plans to do here in El Norte."

Harvey put in affably, "There you are! That's probably the truth. It explains everything."

"But the letter *is* here and I only opened it by sheer accident."

"I'm sure you were meant to open it," Laura said spiritedly. "The envelope was purposely written so that you'd misinterpret what it said, and all on stationery that's very familiar to you, too."

"This letter shows that when you tried to keep me from getting worried about not being able to go to Jacksonville, you were doing what Gordon Ulric wanted."

"But I *want* you to go—oh, Felix, don't you understand that Ulric is trying to get rid of his opposition by breaking us apart?"

He pounded his hands dully against his sides. "Laura, all I really know is that this sort of thing mustn't go on. For the sake of my health and yours, too, we can't have it."

"Nobody insists that you believe what it says on a piece of paper."

"Laura," he told her, "you've got to get away from here."

"What are you talking about?"

"For my own piece of mind and yours, you have to go. Maybe not for long, maybe we really have been wrong for each other and it ought to be a permanent separation. You'd find no trouble getting a divorce."

"That's a very easy way to solve a problem," Laura said. "Your temper has the best of you so get a divorce —and remarry into your 'station', which I think is what it used to be called. Somebody like Janice Ulric, I suppose, who was raised with you. And if her father should give you a wedding present of the land he currently plans to build on, why, that wouldn't be too bad, either."

Felix whirled around, his hands extended in front of him and curled like claws. If he had been facing Laura, he would have done violence to her, and each of them knew it. Harvey, watching with wide and frightened eyes, whimpered softly.

"You didn't have to turn around just then," Laura said, her voice sinking to a whisper. "If somebody else had been saying it, you'd have attacked first and felt sorry about it afterwards, if at all. But even though you were provoked to the limit, Felix, and I admit I did it on purpose to find out what you'd do, you didn't touch me."

"Laura," he said, his soft voice matching hers, "it's better for you if you go."

"You don't really want me to," she pointed out. "If you did you'd have tried to get rid of me with those hands or you'd have kicked me off the Coralton area. Felix, we need each other very much."

"For your own sake," he started. He might have been talking to her from a distance, from the other end of a tunnel. "I don't know how long I can keep any control of myself if this sort of thing keeps happening."

"You'll have to learn," Laura said firmly, but knew her face had become pale wth shock. "The two of us will never need each other more than we do now, and I'm not leaving you as long as I can help it."

Part Three

From a View to a Kill in the Morning

THIRTEEN

Laura walked toward the house with her head high. Not till she was more than halfway to her destination did she realize that she had drawn up her left hand thoughtfully around the front of her neck. She pulled it down to one side instantly, and was grateful that nobody had been close enough to see what she'd been doing.

Lightly, but without showing tension, she walked toward the bedroom that she and Felix shared. As she worked her way down the hall she saw that their door was open. The sound of a maid vacuum-cleaning did not come, as she expected; instead, she heard the rustle of clothing.

Laura stood on the threshold and looked in. A ray of sun from the window illuminated Susan's maid uniform and part of the pigskin suitcase open on the bed. Susan

was gently putting one of Laura's evening gowns into the suitcase as Laura watched.

She suddenly asked, "Why are you packing my things?"

Susan turned around hurriedly, and lines of anguish appeared on her friendly fortyish face.

"I'm so sorry about what's happened, ma'am."

Laura waited, not trusting herself to ask the question.

"Mrs. Page told me about it, ma'am," Susan said, breaking the unbearable silence. "She told me you'd be leaving for a while, that's all she said. But I could tell from her voice what had really happened, and I'm sorry."

"When did Mrs. Page tell you this?"

"Just before. She had peen talking to Mr. Felix and I saw him running out of the house after that with a letter in his hand. Mrs. Page looked very—well, satisfied in a grim sort of way. Like she had just done something necessary. Not that Mrs. Page takes pleasure in other peoples troubles, but she does want to have her own way about things."

"I've noticed that," Laura said mechanically. "Where is Mrs. Page now, do you know?"

"In the summer room, I think. At least that's where she was when she called me in and told me to pack your things for you."

Laura didn't ask any further questions, but rushed downstairs and to the main wing of Coralton. She was still wearing the tennis outfit and she wished she had showered and changed into something more fit for the sort of conversation that she was going to have with the older woman. A suit of armor, perhaps, that would cover her from head to foot.

Selina Page was sitting at one of the composition tables in the summer room and planning the week's dinner menus. As Laura watched in silence on entering the room, Selina Page scratched out a line, then shook her head and murmured:

"Felix enjoys scampi, so we'll get 'em and that'll be that."

Laura asked clearly, "Mrs. Page, can I talk to you?"

Selina Page looked up. She extended her left hand for the crook of her cane and raised it carefully from the table. Her gray hair glittered with the movement.

"I would think that you'd go out of your way to avoid talking to me."

"Are you willing to give me a few minutes of your time?"

"Very well, Laura, if you like."

Selina Page's graciousness reminded Laura of the behavior of one of her former directors to an actor shortly after that particular actor had been fired; now that the actor no longer represented any threat to the director's battery of skills, there was no need for any reaction to him but an empty courtesy.

In Selina Page's case, though, that was going to change in a very short time.

"When I came back to my bedroom just a moment ago, I saw Susan packing," Laura said. "Susan told me that she'd been given orders by you."

"That's correct, of course."

"What made you order Susan to pack?"

"I had been speaking to Felix and he told me about a letter you had received. He said that the letter was the last straw as far as he was concerned, and he was going to send you away. It seemed to me that in order to make your situation a little easier, I could instruct Susan to attend to your packing. I realize that packing suitcases is a highly individual affair by and large, but Susan is quite good at it, and I did want to spare you the embarrassment of being at Coralton any longer than—ah, necessary."

"There is no embarrassment," Laura said clearly and sharply, "in being with my husband."

Selina Page's face turned the color of cigarette ash. "I'm sure I've misunderstood you."

"I'm sure you haven't," Laura smiled as if she was

warmly pleased at bringing good news. "I'm not going away from my husband."

The color of Selina Page's face didn't change again, but the sharp features which Felix seemed to have inherited from her had become even sharper. The tip of her nose, as she twitched it savagely, looked as if it were pointed.

"You can't stay!"

"The only way of getting me out is to use force."

"I'm not above doing just exactly that for my son's sake."

"Are you sure it's what he really wants?" Laura asked softly.

Selina Page rapped the crook of her cane against the table top. "There is no sense to all to this conversation about nothing. You have to go, now."

Laura didn't want to repeat what she'd already said. She told her mother-in-law:

"I left Susan upstairs still packing; I was in a hurry to see you and straighten things between us."

Selina Page opened her mouth to say something, but chose to shut it, instead.

Laura pointed out, "One of your servants will know what happened between us, and she'll probably tell the others, too. It'll be a juicy chunk of gossip for them, I'd say."

"My servants don't gossip," the older woman said waspishly.

"Just the same, it would be pleasant to find a way out of this," Laura told her. "For instance, you could call Susan down here, and when she comes, you can pretend that you've talked me into staying here against my will; that ought to fix it."

"I'm not going to be any part of a theatrical exhibition," Selina Page fumed. "*I'm* not a stage actress."

"No, but if you do this one thing you'll save yourself a certain amount of brooding, later on."

Selina Page gripped the cane in her right hand. She stood up slowly and walked over to the house phone against the farthest wall. Before picking up the re-

ceiver she gave a grim nod and looked across at Laura.

"You," she said, "are a damnably clever girl."

Laura was pleasantly tired when she walked into the Spanish salon just before dinner. She had spent the afternoon looking into furniture catalogs and making notes, as well as talking to the cook about her husband's favorite dishes and writing down the recipes.

She had been in the salon for several minutes with Selina Page and Harvey when the maid, Susan, came in with an envelope on a tray and walked over to Laura with it. Susan still looked puzzled after her afternoon's useless work of packing and unpacking; if it had been in her nature to seem resentful, she'd probably have done that, too.

"Mr. Felix asked me to deliver this note to you just before dinner."

"Thank you."

Laura opened it. Her eyes moved across what was written on the stiff stationery without quite registering the meaning of the words. It occurred to her that letters were playing quite an important part in her life, as of this morning.

Harvey asked hopefully, "Good news?"

"No, I'm afraid not." She looked directly at her mother-in-law. "It says, 'Laura, I've decided to stay in town till further notice as I think it's important that we ought to be away from each other for a while. Please don't be angry. Please try to realize that I'm doing this because I'm worried about you—and because I can't be sure how much I can trust myself.' I think you'd like to see the rest of it."

Laura handed the letter to her mother-in-law and left the room. It gave her no consolation that Selina Page would now be examining the words above her son's signature: *All my love, always.*

FOURTEEN

ON THAT night, Laura was to sleep by herself.

She had gone directly upstairs with a book and a few self-appointed chores. The evening passed in doing them, and not for the first time, she thanked heaven silently that it was possible to do so many foolish but necessary chores and keep from thinking.

But bed itself was a different matter. She hesitated in front of the night table phone and then brought her right hand hurriedly down to her side. She would glare balefully at the phone every so often after that, but the glares changed, in spite of herself, to pleading looks.

By ten o'clock, Laura had settled herself in bed with her book, which was *the* current best seller. Laura had finished reading two episodes which took place among animals whom the author chose to refer to as human beings. She put the book down, feeling a distinct revulsion toward a man who could bring himself to write so unfeelingly about women (probably a married man with a shrewish wife); and for the hundredth time, looked at the black telephone on the night table.

She knew she wouldn't be able to get any sleep till she had spoken to her husband, so she made the call herself. The clerk at the Apocalypse Hotel told her regretfully that Mr. Page wasn't answering his telephone, which meant that he was out of his room. Laura left a message asking Felix to call, and broke the connection.

She couldn't do any more reading, and she didn't

want to do anything else. She turned off the light above the bed and prepared to relax for a while, at least. She wouldn't go to sleep, of course.

But she was in a surprisingly sleepy frame of mind when she realized that she'd heard a metallic clicking not too far from her.

She stirred and opened her eyes. The big window was closed and a venetian blind moved slightly in the dimness. The cooling system had been put on, and it made a slight scratchy noise.

Laura turned in bed, automatically looking toward the door. She wasn't surprised, somehow, to see a wedge of light from the hall grow large and then diminish quickly. There was another click of noise as the tongue of the door found its slot.

"Hello, dear," Laura said sleepily. "Wait, I'll put on the light for you."

The newcomer mumbled something or other. but Laura identified it as a request to keep the room in darkness.

"You shouldn't be so darn considerate, Felix," she said. "You'll stumble and fall over something, and it won't really have been any help at all."

The newcomer mumbled again, and Laura knew that he was closer to her. She felt comforted by his presence, but at the same time, and without knowing why, a sense of chilling dismay seemed to start at the top of her throat and work downward.

"Do you realize what's happening to us, dear?" she asked. "You're being extra considerate, and so am I. That can't last. Eventually the honeymoon has to end, and then we'll find out who we really are. Both of us may be in for some surprises, I think."

The newcomer grunted. It was odd, come right down to it, she thought, that Felix hadn't spoken a word to her since he'd walked in.

The newcomer took a careful step that made the floor creak. It seemed odd to her that Felix, of all people, didn't even bother to take off his clothes and brush his teeth before joining her.

Laura's sight was beginning to clear and she could dimly make out the man's figure. He seemed a little more full than she expected, a little more heavy. She was going to tell Felix that marriage was making him expand when he suddenly moved toward her.

Perhaps it was supposed to be a playful lunge, but there seemed to be considerable energy in back of it. The upper half of his body would have struck the bed if a pair of hard hands hadn't suddenly been extended against the mattress.

Laura laughed as he straightened.

"Better luck next time, dea—" she started to say as the phone rang.

The phone rang.

It needed only a few seconds for her to understand what had happened. The man in this room with her was a stranger. That playful lunge of his hadn't been intended to be at all playful.

For a longer time than she could have expected she lay paralyzed, terribly aware of her small stature and weak hands. Nothing could be done, absolutely nothing. It would make no sense for her to pick up the phone, either; Felix was too far away to help.

The window was closed. Between her and the door stood this man who had come into her room.

Only afterwards did she realize that the ringing phone had startled him, too. He couldn't possibly have expected it, and there had seemed to be nothing to stop him.

Laura screamed. Her mouth was open and the sound was leaving it before she could do anything else; it was almost as if the sound was in control of her, rather than the other way around.

The stranger's hand was outstretched as he leaned forward, probably to slap her into silence. Laura made claws of her hands and held them at eye level to defend herself.

The man struck out towards her.

Laura felt a piece of cloth suddenly shred against her sharp nails. The newcomer drew back, grunting.

He called out and ran. The outer door opened and shut furiously. Laura flicked the bed light on, then got up and ran to the door. She locked it and tested it three times to make sure that it would remain locked.

The phone was still ringing, but as Laura hurried toward it so anxiously, it stopped.

She picked it up on silence. She phoned the Apocalypse Hotel again, but was told that Mr. Page hadn't returned yet. Probably Felix had called independently of her first try to reach him at his hotel room.

It was ten forty-five. Laura put through a phone call to Lieutenant Charles Vogel of the Apocalypse police force.

"This man was in your room and tried to hit you, but you ripped off a piece of material from the sleeve of his jacket," Lieutenant Vogel said. "And you claim that it wasn't your husband?"

"Of course it wasn't Felix."

The lieutenant scratched some of the graying hairs at the sides of his bullet head. Laura was sitting with him in the summer room, which was sketchily lit at night, and Selina Page had only been excluded after some angry discussion with her. Harvey, puzzled and anxious, had gone away reluctantly after saying that if Laura wanted any help she should call out.

Vogel rubbed his hands against each other. He had come out from his home; the top button of his shirt was undone, his hair was in disarray, and his sports jacket looked as if it had been left in the sun. He frowned down at the notebook as he sat opposite Laura and asked his questions.

"Hadn't your husband made some threats against you in the recent past, and isn't it possible that he might have wanted to carry them out tonight?"

"No, it's not."

"Please explain that."

"My husband will get angry all of a sudden and hit out, but when the storm passes he's perfectly all right.

He wouldn't come skulking into the bedroom late at night and try to do me any harm."

"But I assume you know that stories have been going around to the effect that the two of you aren't getting along well." Vogel paused. "One of my jobs is to listen carefully when somebody gossips."

"Then I take it for granted, Lieutenant Vogel, that you know Mr. Page has decided to stay in town for a few days."

"He's only sleeping in town," Vogel said mechanically, "but I'm sure he's still trying to get across his ideas about keeping this particular stretch of land the way it was back in the nineteenth century."

Laura said stiffly, "I assume that you aren't too sympathetic to his goals, Lieutenant."

"Well, if your husband loses out, it'll give me fewer policing problems," Vogel said, picking his words carefully, "but he's fighting the tide. The countryside has to change along with everything else in the world, and action movements to keep things intact always end up being a little foolish."

"Then I take it you'll buy an apartment in El Norte when Gordon Ulric starts putting up the first of his new projects."

"Does your husband really believe that Ulric could ever get permission—?" Vogel stared. "But I suppose Page is running frightened, and that adds to my problems. Wait here for me, will you?"

He folded his notebook and walked to the door, which he closed gently behind him. Laura sat looking out absently at the brightly-lighted garden and at a mountain peak that shone in the moonlight. Was it possible, she wondered, to sit and do nothing and not let a single thought about Felix into her head? For only a few minutes at least, if she was lucky, she might become a vegetable.

Vogel returned more swiftly than a tired man might be expected to. He paused in front of the chair he'd been using, but stood and looked down at her. His face seemed to have been wiped clean of emotion.

"I'm going to suggest to you that your husband came into the room and tried to hit you and that you accidentally tore some threads off a sleeve of his jacket."

"It isn't true."

"Frankly, I'm beginning to think that the man is too dangerous to be let run around," Vogel said moodily. "Heaven knows what else a man with his hair-trigger temper is likely to do on a night like this."

"If my husband gets into trouble it'll be somebody else's fault," Laura said doggedly. "He's registered at the Apocalypse Hotel and I know he tried to phone me tonight."

"Your husband hasn't got an alibi, as far as we can tell right now."

"But he must be in town!"

"No, he's more likely to be—well, someplace else." Vogel smiled without enjoyment. "I need the extra work like I need a broken leg, but I'm going to pick him up."

Laura said automatically, "I'll come with you."

Vogel's eyes probed her as if for the first time. "I think you'll be sensible when you see some proof against him that not even you will be able to deny for a minute."

Laura said with confidence, "There won't be any proof against him."

"No? I just talked to the maid, to his mother, and to his half-brother. All of them tell me that the threads of material that you tore off a jacket sleeve belong to a sports jacket that was taken away with him by guess who."

Quickly Laura said, "Then there's more than one jacket like it and somebody else was wearing one tonight! I know it."

"You'll be able to find out for yourself," Vogel said. "I'll go with you for now to help you into a coat. You're going to need some kind of covering in this weather."

"And of course I need to be kept from getting in touch with Felix, or leaving any message for him."

Vogel nodded gravely. "Of course."

He allowed Laura to walk in front of him up to the bedroom. When he reached it, he stationed himself in the doorway and watched Laura bring out a woolen topcoat from her closet. She took the time to put it on carefully, hoping against hope that in the time that passed Felix would get away from the place where Lieutenant Vogel expected to find him.

Vogel snapped, "You can button up when you're in my car."

She nodded and turned on leaden feet. The phone rang. Laura darted toward it, but Vogel took a leap into the room and gently but effectively restrained her.

"Will somebody get it downstairs?" he asked.

"No, that's his special unlisted number and this is the only outlet."

"I didn't know that, before." In trying to make himself heard above the phone bell, Vogel's tones were unnaturally loud. "Your husband might very well have been buzzing your number in that case. If, of course, there really was a previous phone call and you didn't invent it to give Page some sort of an alibi."

"I haven't been lying," Laura insisted. "If I wanted to do that, I wouldn't have reported what happened here tonight."

"Maybe you were sure that your screaming had been heard and you had to think up a story that was close to the truth as a way of explaining it."

"Felix didn't come here tonight, I tell you!"

"And *I* tell *you* that we're going to check it out right now," Vogel said. "Let's make tracks."

The phone was still ringing shrilly when Laura forced herself to step out of the room.

FIFTEEN

Vogel's car was a two-year-old Chevvy with the fewest possible accessories. The motor hummed smoothly, though, and Laura realized that she was in a car meant for work and not for display.

Even through the dust-caked side windows (the windshield and mirrors were nearly spotless) El Norte's scenery brought a catch to her throat. Here was a stretch of land where it was possible to forget about everything but the earth below; the sky and stars above—and, as Felix had once remarked to her, about God.

She couldn't help asking Vogel, "Doesn't this take your breath away?"

But the lieutenant, as she might have known he would, answered sourly, "It's hard as hell to protect the residents against outsiders when they live so far from each other and the cops have to work from as far away as Apocalypse."

Waspishly, Laura asked, "Where in this jungle are we going to?"

Vogel didn't indulge himself in the luxury of talking until he had painstakingly topped a rise. "There's a public meeting tonight, one of those 'Let's-pitch-in-and-save-our-land' meetings. I've seen a lot of those things in El Norte over the years, but never with so much urgency in back of it. At any rate there's only one place to hold a meeting like that."

"The lunchroom, do you mean?"

"Abe Garten's place is more than a lunchroom, no

matter what it's officially called." Vogel was genuinely shocked.

"If Gordon Ulric has his way," Laura took pleasure in telling the lieutenant, "it'll probably become a bar, instead."

She had heard about Abe Garten's lunchroom, probably the only one of its kind anywhere. Abe was a painter who didn't make enough money at it, and he owned the one business permitted in El Norte except for two gas stations. It was a combination grocery, restaurant and juke joint for teen-agers. Every so often, Abe would let his main room be used for showing a movie that met his high standards, or for a concert entertainment. A ballet company had once entertained in Abe's main room, and so had a jazz combo from Sweden.

"It's the weirdest effect to hear jazz played like those men did it," Felix had told her. "They turned *When the Saints Go Marching In* into what you'd have sworn was a native Swedish folk song played at a fast tempo."

Nowhere but at Abe Garten's was a resident of El Norte likely to come across a bulletin board, but Abe kept one in front of his place. If there were a public meeting going on in El Norte, it was certainly being held at Abe Garten's lunchroom.

The place looked like any other building in the area, except that perhaps forty cars were ringed around it tonight. Vogel unerringly discovered one of the few spaces left, and parked his Chevvy snugly in it.

Laura followed him up half a dozen wooden steps past the bulletin board and to the entrance.

The bare walls were lined with tables which had been cleared away from the dining area. Two tables had been set end-to-end near the farthest wall from Laura, and former U.S. Senator Anderton J. Covey stood back of the join between the tables. He held a gavel in one hand. Some six dozen men, women, and several older teenagers sat in the audience. A swift look over the crowd pinpointed Felix sitting at the far end of the

third row from the front. There were empty seats in front of him, in back of him, and at his side.

Vogel had followed Laura's gaze. He whispered, "They must've tried real hard to keep him from knowing about it. Stay here, please."

Ned Boyer was talking from his seat as Vogel started down the aisle. He walked softly, and the only boards that creaked were the ones under Ned Boyer or the chairman. He sat down beside Felix and started whispering earnestly.

Ex-Senator Covey suddenly said, "Pardon me a moment, Ned. . . . Might I ask you, sir, to refrain from whispering while someone else has the floor? If you wish to speak, sir, you will be given ample opportunity."

Vogel nodded. Laura, watching him, saw his thumb rise as he gestured toward the back of the room. Felix stayed where he was. The thumb rose again, more urgently. This time Felix shook his head with determination and fierceness.

It was impossible to guess what else might happen if the two men sat by themselves. Laura carefully eased her way along the aisle and downwards. An occasional glance was directed toward her, and when her identity had been noted, the glances became more sharp.

A big, rumpled-looking man suddenly leaned toward her and shrugged. Laura guessed that he was the inimitable Abe Garten himself, and that he was admitting as loudly as he could that she was one resident of El Norte with whom he wasn't acquainted.

No hands were raised when Ned Boyer finished speaking and sat down, but Laura saw Felix move forward in his seat and then look around hurriedly. He must have been hesitating about whether or not he could bring himself to talk to this big group, even though he had known most of the older people here since childhood.

Laura sat down in front of Felix and turned to face him. He looked startled at sight of her, but a glimpse of the chairman kept him from saying a word.

It was as Laura reached for a comforting hand and drew it towards herself that she saw a two-inch rip in the left sleeve of his light gray sports jacket.

She looked across quickly at Vogel, and saw that the lieutenant's eyes were gleaming; he had seen the rip, too, thanks to her. Laura had apparently done her husband more harm than he'd have been likely to do to himself.

She suddenly squeezed his hand as hard as she was able to; if he was going to be arrested, there wasn't any way of being sure when she'd get even this close to him again. Felix looked pained at the pressure. He called out.

The noise was enough to bring the chairman's sharp eyes swivelling around in Felix's direction. Anderton Covey's fine features darkened briefly in irritation when he saw who had called out.

"Please ask to be recognized in the usual manner," he said loftily. His violet eyes swept the room. "Isn't there anybody else who would like to? Well, then, I call on—ah, you."

Felix pulled his left hand away from Laura and reached into a pocket for a typewritten piece of letter paper which had been folded three times. He tried to stand up, but had to fall back twice before his third try was successful. As it was, he wove back and forth and looked back longingly at the seat he'd occupied.

"Well?" the chairman asked quickly. "If you've changed your mind about speaking in public, we'll get on with our business."

"No, wait!" His voice was much too high, and he paused to clear his throat. At one side, Vogel settled back with the air of a man willing to take all night if that will bring him what he wants.

"I'd like to say a few words about—about buildings that usually go up in established neighborhoods." He stopped briefly as if wondering about how he'd been able to get out even one sentence in front of this large group.

Murmuring broke out toward the back of the au-

dience, but it was stilled frantically by a number of people loudly whispering, *"Shhh!"* Most of the faces in this crowd were stolid and emotionless; their owners had decided not to be responsive to anything that Felix Page might tell them.

". . . changes are being made with no regard to what is already close by," Felix was saying. "A new structure doesn't exist in and for itself, but as part of the neighborhood, the surrounding area. Too many architects forget that simple fact when they put up a building, and instead, they try to showboat themselves into prominence."

Anderton Covey asked sharply, "What has that got to do with our situation here?"

Felix said that new structures being put up were bound to do violence to the concepts under which El Norte had thrived for so many years. He went on to talk about the high points of the program he had drawn up in order to keep El Norte as close to intact (he probably startled himself by using the Latin phrase, *virgo intacta*) as possible. After giving some consideration to the importance of limiting the width of Florida Three, he said a few words about expanding, in a controlled way, the tourist facilities in and around El Norte.

Laura's eyes wandered from one person to another in the audience, but came back to the face of a matronly woman with knitting in her lap. The woman had been knitting industriously through Ned Boyer's speech, as Laura recalled, but something in Felix's words had caught her attention. She looked up at him, the knitting temporarily forgotten.

Laura crossed her fingers and told herself not to distract Felix by even a glance of encouragement, or he might lose the thread of his remarks and trail off into vague patches of nonsense.

"Now you've probably heard about plans to fill our canyons with earth and in that way to destroy our wooden bridges for everything except display pur-

poses," Felix went on. "I feel that the idea of filling our canyons is obscene, but something that has happened in the last few days has finally convinced me our wooden bridges can be as dangerous as our opponents claim."

The woman with the knitting nodded slowly, and Laura saw with pleasure that her attention was as far away from the needlework as ever.

"What I am now willing to suggest, by way of a compromise," Felix said, "is that we replace the wooden bridges with concrete bridges built to resemble the old structures as much as possible. Such a move would actually be cheaper than filling in the canyons, and I have spent most of the day working on facts and figures to prove my point."

The woman with the knitting lowered her eyes at last. Her needles flashed vigorously. Felix must have sensed a general slack-off of interest. He said promptly:

"I'll be glad to make these figures available to the chairman, along with my previous report on the entire situation."

Ex-Senator Covey looked dazed and appreciative.

Felix said a brief, "Thank you, all," and sat down. Somebody in the room began to applaud, but was silenced by a woman's booming voice.

"I'm sure we all deeply appreciate the work that Felix Page has put in," she started, mentioning Felix by name for the first time before the gathering.

Felix passed some papers to Laura and asked her to pass them forward and make sure that they reached the chairman's desk. Laura had finished doing her part, and had given him a congratulatory smile and mock kiss, when she heard Lieutenant Vogel talking quietly to Felix.

"You have to face some music now, Page," the lieutenant was saying. "Come along with me, or I'll put you under arrest in front of this whole audience."

Felix shot up hurriedly and walked toward the door.

Vogel shrugged at not being able to walk closely to his man, but didn't look upset otherwise. He followed briskly.

Laura, walking back of the lieutenant, watched Felix accept hearty congratulations for his speech from the man she had decided was the owner of Abe's Lunchroom. She told herself that Felix had won a difficult audience for the first time in his life, but that now he was going to lose something else. He was about to lose his freedom.

Near the door, the voices of the speakers was like the distant drone of an airplane. Felix turned abruptly on the lieutenant.

"Why am I under arrest?"

"Let's put it this way," Vogel said tiredly. "I'm going to give up a night's relaxation, which I need very badly, in order to ask you some questions. Then I'll decide if you're under arrest or not. When we were back there, I just wanted to get you to come with me, so I—um, exaggerated a little."

Felix said, "If that's the case you can ask the questions right here."

"I could, but I won't."

Laura, looking at her husband's taut face, said sadly, "I only wish I hadn't taken your hand before you started to knock those people for a loop."

"What's my hand got to do with it?" Felix demanded. "I wish somebody would tell me once and for all exactly what this is all about."

"A man tried to hurt me tonight," Laura said.

Felix pushed Vogel lightly away from him. "What happened, Laura? Tell me everything."

"I was ready to go to sleep when somebody came into the bedroom. I thought it was you, and I talked to him pretty jokingly. Then the phone rang, and I knew it was you on the other end."

"I called two times." Felix pointed at a line of phone booths against the far wall. "From there."

Vogel started skeptically, "Can you prove what time you got to this place?"

"Just a minute. What happened then, Laura?"

"I realized it wasn't you, and I screamed, and he lunged for me, and I tore some material off his jacket, and he ran out. Then I called Lieutenant Vogel."

Felix, standing between Vogel and Laura, turned to the lieutenant. "So you came right down here and now you want to ask me more questions. Well, I can't prove what time I got here. Abe must have been in the back somewhere and we didn't see each other. I tried to phone my wife, but there wasn't any answer. Then I sat by myself in a small room and went over the cost figures I was going to submit. I went back to the booth to try and reach Laura again and spent some time there. When I came out, the meeting had started. I joined the others, or tried to. As soon as I sat down, people moved away from me as if I'd caught something contagious."

Vogel ignored the bitterness in Felix's voice. He gestured to Felix's left jacket sleeve.

"When did you make that rip?"

"Earlier. During the day, sometime."

"How?"

Felix blinked several times before he asked in turn, "Is that the big deal? Laura tore a chunk of material off somebody's sports jacket and you think it was mine. Is that the whole point?"

"You're supposed to be answering questions," Vogel said thinly.

Felix disregarded that, and turned to Laura. "Do you think I tried to hurt you?"

"I know you didn't."

"By proof or by feeling?"

"The proof is that I know you."

She would have used another word instead of "know", except that she didn't want Felix to be thrown off-stride for even a moment. But then she did startle him so that his mouth gaped, as she suddenly whirled toward Vogel.

"There *is* proof," she said exultantly. "Real proof that Felix didn't touch me."

"What?" Vogel asked emotionlessly.

"The other man used his right hand," Laura told him. "His *right* hand. Felix's jacket is ripped at the *left* sleeve. I should have realized it right away, but so many things have been happening that it slipped my mind for a while."

"Your testimony in Mr. Page's favor can't be called courtroom proof."

Laura managed to hide her dismay as she looked at Felix, but he didn't seem at all worried. He smiled.

"You'd have to prove with scientific evidence, lieutenant," Felix said, "that one rip matches the other. I don't believe you can do that."

"I don't believe in the coincidence of two ripped jackets," Vogel told him.

"But there really *is* a coincidence here." Felix was smiling; this one-man-to-another talk couldn't have been nearly as painful to him as addressing a large audience; and he'd done well at that chore. "Or maybe I can win you over to my side by proving to you that I ripped the sleeve of my jacket someplace else."

"Where?" Vogel barked. "Show me. Prove it."

Laura heard footsteps in back of them and looked around in time to see the man who was approaching, stubby finger to his lips. It was Gordon Ulric, dressed, as usual, all in black, except for a gleaming white shirt. His hair, gray at the temples, caught an overhead shaft of light as he moved with his soldierly stiffness. He talked only to Lieutenant Vogel.

"I wish you could be quieter over here, Lieutenant," he whispered. "After all, people can see and even hear some of the words. I can assure you that it looks and sounds dreadful when you know that somebody from El Norte is being put under arrest."

Felix's face turned brick red with anger.

Laura said to Vogel, "If I wanted to get some man in trouble and I had a reputation for dressing in black, I'd make a point of buying a sports jacket like the other man's and wearing it in a dark place—always

provided, of course, that I'm planning to see to it that the other man is identified as having done something I myself did."

Gordon Ulric looked as if a mouse had run into this room in violation of all rules of decorum. Laura, who had wanted a more violent reaction in order to pay him back for having needled Felix, must have shown her dissatisfaction.

"Are you officially accusing Mr. Ulric," Vogel demanded, "of having assaulted you?"

"I'd rather not make any remarks about that," Laura said quietly, "till I'm more certain."

Ulric exploded, "This is insane! The woman is desperate to save her husband, and thinks that putting a good citizen in jeopardy will be of some help."

"Mr. Ulric, I'm inclined to agree with you," Vogel said, "but I'm going to ask you to come with me all the same. I think we can probably get it settled at the headquarters building."

"Lieutenant, I don't intend to be seen in a police station."

It was the wrong apprcach to take. Vogel smiled acidly.

"But that's where you're going, Mr. Ulric," he said. "I hope that you haven't got any more objections because they won't change anything."

Gordon Ulric rubbed his hands together as if the answer to his problem would show up when he had rubbed them hard enough. He finally decided to take it in stride.

"Very well, Lieutenant," he said. "Purely as a matter of form, I shall ask my daughter to telephone our family lawyer."

"You're entitled to do that, Mr. Ulric, but I can give you my word that you aren't seriously suspected of a crime and that you won't be given anything like a third degree."

"Precautions for form's sake can't hurt."

On tiptoes he walked back to one of the rear aisles

and leaned over to talk to somebody who was sitting in the third chair from the end of the row. Janice Ulric promptly stood up and joined her father in the aisle.

Vogel, watching them, said, "If there's any more evidence against you, Page, Gordon Ulric will bring it up when he's at H.Q., and tell whatever else he knows against you."

Laura said promptly, "There isn't anything to know."

"If there is, though, I'll get it tonight," Vogel said. "I don't want this case unsolved by morning. I've got too many other things to do. But you shouldn't get the idea, Mrs. Page, that I'm bringing Ulric downtown only because you gave him the bad eye."

"It almost seems as if I were doing your job," Laura said softly. "Only, of course, Ulric can't hurt my husband in any way."

Felix suddenly put in, "Just a minute, Vogel! I was telling you that I could prove I had ripped my jacket somewhere else. Do you want to get that proof?"

"Sure."

"Then we'll need to make a slight side trip," Felix said, "but it won't take long."

"It had better not," Vogel told him sharply. "If I think you're wasting time, Page, heaven help you."

Laura heard two sets of steps tiptoeing in their direction. She looked up to see Gordon Ulric walking as if he were alone and the other sounds were an echo. In back of him, not bothering to muffle her steps as carefully as her father did, was Janice Ulric. She was dressed in forest green that touched off her flame-red hair perfectly, and she wore textured white stockings. Her eyes raked Laura, and then she glanced casually at the lieutenant.

"I'm joining the fun," she said. "I haven't been to the Apocalypse headquarters since I was a child."

"You'd be welcome at any other time," Vogel said carefully, "but you'd only distract every man in the place tonight."

"What my daughter means," Gordon Ulric hurried

to say, "is that I don't want her making the phone call from El Norte because it's so hard to tell who is liable to listen in by accident."

"Well, then, Miss Ulric, if you want to get into town I'm certainly not going to stop you."

"Of course you won't," Janice drawled, and the unspoken threat against Vogel's job couldn't have been more plain. "I'll travel in with my father."

Vogel pursed his lips. "You and Mr. Page were supposed to get married at one time, as I recall," he said thoughtfully. "Why, yes, Miss Ulric, I think you'd be welcome in our little group."

"Good," Janice smiled. "We'll use my car."

"I'm afraid not," Vogel said. "Unless you want to go off by yourself, Miss Ulric, and that's your privilege. The rest of us will be taking my car."

"Oh, well." Janice made a face, but Laura noticed that she looked attractive in spite of the distortion.

Vogel opened the door. A brisk wind touched them. Janice, the last one to leave, forgot to close the door and responded indifferently when she was reminded about doing it. Gordon Ulric had to do it himself, shutting it softly.

Felix raised his head with apprehension. Laura, alert to his every mood, asked, "What's wrong, dear?"

"The wind is likely to make things harder," Felix said.

"How do you mean?"

Vogel, at Felix's side, put in, "Let's not talk right now, Page, in case somebody going by happens to overhear us and pass the word along. The less gossip, the better."

Janice sniffed when she saw Vogel's Chevvy, and looked dismayed at the prospect of using the stained graying seat covers. But she settled herself in the back and promptly pulled out the steely covering where an ash tray was supposed to be. She gasped, then murmured:

"Can't you even afford an ash tray?"

"Nobody in my family can afford to smoke," Vogel

said gently. "It's harder this way, but safer. Mr. Ulric, please sit next to your daughter. The rest of us will take the front seat. Mrs. Page, please sit next to me. I don't want your husband to be tempted for even a second into doing anything nasty while I'm at the wheel."

While the motor was warming up, Vogel asked, "What's our first stop, Page?"

Felix muttered.

"Well? I can't hear you."

"The bridge," Felix said at last. "The bridge that Oscar Clymer was killed on."

"Oh? Is that where you claim you tore your jacket sleeve today?"

"I did rip the damn thing there. I wanted to see for myself if any bridge in El Norte could be called dangerous, and to make sure about it, I went out to the place where Clymer was shot. While I was looking at the spot from which the man fell, the left sleeve of my jacket tore on a chunk of wood and flapped against it. I was too preoccupied to go back to my hotel and change jackets."

"And you think that the cloth would still be there?"

"If the wind hasn't blown it away."

"We'll look." Vogel backed his car with the help of Janice Ulric's guiding remarks. "Never let it be said that you didn't have every possible chance, Page."

Vogel kept quiet during the drive, except to tell Janice not to do any back-seat driving. For Janice, to be in a car and not driving, was apparently a kind of exquisite torture.

Laura, looking out the window, didn't think she'd ever see enough of El Norte. Late at night, it seemed to have changed its personality. There was a feeling of wilderness; of land that had never been observed by human eyes; and at the same time, there was the certain knowledge of not being too far from civilization and comfort. To Laura, it was like a capsule version of her life till now; of the difficulties and hardships that had led her to Felix Page and to Coralton.

"Here we are," Vogel said. "We'll check it."

He drew a flashlight out of the glove compartment. Its fading yellow eye lit on sand, wood, and on a point near one end of the bridge where a large hole in the railing had been left unrepaired.

"You can come out with me," Vogel said to Felix. "I don't want you to think I'm being unfair."

Laura left the car, too, in back of Felix. She heard the rear door opening and knew that Gordon Ulric had stepped out as well. Laura wanted to ask Vogel whether he approved of letting Gordon Ulric so close to evidence in Felix's favor; but it was more important for her to be near Felix and see that her husband kept himself in control. Vogel might send her away, too.

"Well?" Vogel asked, his flashlight playing over the hole at one side of the bridge. "I don't see any threads here."

"You're right." Felix had been touching the wood. Under his feet, sand shifted gratingly. "Then it must've happened when I was coming close to this point with my eyes on the hole and nothing else. I certainly tore my jacket hereabouts; that much I know for a fact —Laura, what in the world is wrong?"

Laura had let out a gasp. She'd turned briefly to watch Gordon Ulric as he walked along the railing. Ulric moved slowly, both hands on the wood, prodding it thoroughly before he took a new step. There was an outthrust piece at one point, and he hissed as his fingers touched it; the sound had riveted Laura's attention firmly on him. Then he let out a sigh and his fingers moved rapidly over the tip of the outthrust wood. The fingers made a pulling motion as if he was extracting something from the wood or drawing something away from it.

Before Laura ran over to him his fingers were already raised aloft. The smile of satisfaction that he gave was shown in detail under the nearly-full moon above, and Laura could see his teeth gleaming wetly.

He wouldn't talk to anyone but Vogel. "What does this woman want?"

Laura said, "Ulric was walking around slowly and

looking for part of Felix's jacket. And he found it, I know he found it. I could see what he did."

Laura pantomimed his gestures with her own fingers. The flashlight in Vogel's hand played across her.

The car door suddenly opened and shut. Janice Ulric's high heels clattered on the bridge.

"What's going on?" she asked brightly. "You haven't found anything, have you?"

Laura said in a flat tone of voice, "that really *would* be a setback; wouldn't it?"

Felix had been examining Gordon Ulric's face, but suddenly nodded and caught Vogel's eye.

"He did it all right," Felix said. "I've known him for a long time, and I can tell from his face that he did something wrong."

Gordon Ulric asked, "Lieutenant, can you possibly think of one reason why I would put this boy's very life in danger?"

"As an academic exercise, sure I can," Vogel nodded. "You think that if he's in trouble with the police, he won't be able to stand in the way of your putting up apartment buildings in El Norte; and I'm sure you've told yourself that some other information will come up in time to prove that Page is innocent."

Ulric had grown rigid, which was his only admission that the lieutenant had made a statement about him. His eyes were lowered.

Laura pointed out, "Another reason might be that he killed Oscar Clymer himself from a distance and wants nothing better than to see somebody else go to the electric chair for having done it."

Janice asked the lieutenant, "Does my father have to listen to this 'academic exercise' nonsense?"

Laura went on without a change of tone, "Or maybe he knows who really did do it and wants to protect that person because she's very close to him."

"Just a minute," Vogel said smoothly after Janice had snarled. "I realize that you feel, Mrs. Page, that if your husband is in trouble, you want everybody else in

the same boat; but it isn't easy to crowd everybody in on a case like this. The fact is, that you and your husband were the only two people on this bridge with Clymer and that Clymer fell or was pushed over."

"He was shot before he fell," Laura insisted.

"There was no bullet-wound on the body, and according to the final post-mortem—"

Laura's head whipped up. "Yes, you told Felix and myself that you were waiting for results from the complete examination to know whether Felix strangled Oscar Clymer. This is as good a time to mention it as any other, Lieutenant Vogel. You know perfectly well by now that Felix never hurt the man; don't you, Lieutenant? *Don't you?*"

Vogel glanced at the Ulrics, then wiped his mouth slowly with the back of a hand.

"Why do you want to keep this a secret?" Laura prodded him. "The post-mortem results have to clear Felix of the murder, and I think you should say so to the people who aren't above trying to destroy Felix, and who don't care what they do to me in the process, either."

"Lieutenant, I want to sue this woman for slander," Janice snapped. "I want to take out the papers now, or as soon as possible."

Gordon Ulric waved it aside tiredly. "Pay no attention to this, Janice."

"This man wrote me a letter," Laura said, "but he addressed it in such a way that Felix was bound to open it first. It was supposed to make Felix blow his top and alienate other people from him."

Vogel smacked a fist into a palm. "This has got to stop, and I mean it. I'm not going to stand for all this yelling and screaming here in the middle of the night."

Laura knew that Felix had touched her gently; but she was the first to sneak after a moment's silence, and almost as if she hadn't heard Vogel.

"We came here to find some evidence, but it's been destroyed practically under your nose, Lieutenant."

No other accusation could have made Vogel so angry. To work the fury out of his system, he clicked the flashlight on and off.

"I don't think that the evidence, so-called, ever existed," he said when he could trust himself to talk. "I'm not even absolutely sure that you saw Mr. Ulric do anything a few minutes ago. In fact, Mrs. Page, I think you're nothing more or less than a hysterical woman."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Gordon Ulric said pleasantly, with a warm smile at having been vindicated. "Your confidence in me is deeply gratifying."

Janice Ulric said coolly, "I have a suggestion that will be of some help."

Gordon Ulric told her, "Jan, I wish you wouldn't interf—discuss the matter till you and I are at home."

"My suggestion," Janice Ulric said firmly, "will give this woman a chance to prove her husband's innocence —at least his innocence of having tried to do her any harm earlier tonight. That is, of course, if she wants to go through with it."

Laura turned warily. Janice had never looked more attractive than she did with a flick of wind lashing two tufts of red hair. Her skin glowed; her figure looked carelessly beautiful for once, rather than as if it had been tended with continual loving care. All the love in Janice Ulric's nature, Laura realized, had been spent on Janice herself.

"I know there's a trick to it," Laura said. "Let me hear what's on your mind, though."

Janice waited till she had caught the lieutenant's attention, which she obtained within a moment's silence. "This material, whatever it might be, is missing. I mean, of course, the threads torn from Felix's suit. What I would suggest is that she search for them."

"Where?" Vogel asked.

"On the bridge, for a start." Janice pointed past the railing and added, "Down there, afterwards. You never know where the wind might carry little chunks of wool

or whatever the jacket material happens to be; but they can't have been carried too far."

Vogel said thinly, "There's no point to playing games about it, Miss Ulric. You know perfectly well that it's impossible to find anything like that down there. All that would happen is that Mrs. Page here would become rumpled and uncomfortable from the exertion. I'm not going to have an investigation stopped while you're permitted to indulge in a personal act of spite."

"Lieutenant, I resent that!" Before she could be stopped, Janice had pinked the flashlight out of Vogel's right hand. She lowered it so that the light would shine wastefully across the sandy earth below. "It certainly isn't too much to ask a loyal little wife to do. Why, I know that if I were married to Felix—not that I'd go through with marriage to a man who's got such an awful temper—I wouldn't hesitate for a minute to get a little dirt on myself if it meant even a slight chance to—"

Felix cleared his throat. The sound surprised Laura and reminded her again that all of them had indirectly been talking about the one person among them who wouldn't say much. Felix, his eyes following the flashlight beam to its destination, suddenly looked away from it and toward the lieutenant.

"Let's do it," he said tersely.

"What are you talking about?"

Felix drew a deep breath to help him keep some self-control. Standing so close to him, Laura could sense his pulses soaring.

"Go down there," Felix said.

"Are you crazy?" Vogel pursed his lips. "All right, Page, you'll get every break and even the crazy ones. First off, though, before we make another move, let me have your jacket."

Felix complied silently. Vogel stretched it across the railing as carefully as he could, flashing the light on every inch of it. The light faded as he worked on, but

drew strength after it had been turned off and then on once again.

Finally Vogel nodded and folded the jacket on his left arm. "No new rips in it, Page; granted. If you're out to pull a fast one, it won't involve your finding some wool you just wrenched off the jacket."

Felix had taken a step toward the end of the bridge. Vogel said:

"Mr. Ulric, bring your daughter to the car and stay there with her."

Janice started angrily, "Of all the damned—"

The lieutenant, addressing himself to Ulric, said, "I don't want to hear your daughter chuckling while Page and I are down below. In fact, I don't want to hear the sound of her voice for a while—or yours."

Ulric remarked stiffly, "I won't accept the suggestion that my daughter is out to cause some mischief."

"She's not only out to, but she's succeeding." Vogel sniffed disapprovingly. "I want you two in the car, and I mean it."

He followed their progress with his flashlight, and Laura noticed that the batteries had become still weaker.

"All right," Vogel said as he turned back. "Come on, and let's have it over with. Mrs. Page, you'd better join this happy little group of explorers."

Winds were shifting the sand below as they descended. Felix took Laura's hand to guide her, in spite of his preoccupation with reaching the depth of the canyon as quickly as possible. More than once Laura felt the area on which she was standing slide out from under her; and it took persistence to keep from communicating her anxiety and distress.

She reached the canyon level with Felix's help, and only several minutes after him. Vogel, the flashlight's yellow beam alternating with a sickly gray in front of him, was the last to reach it because he had stationed himself so he could help Laura.

"Now," Felix said to him, "let me have the flashlight, please, before it burns out."

Vogel didn't hesitate in passing it over. Felix shone it along the gritty sand. "The wind is playing hell around here but I know what I saw just a few minutes ago, and it gave me an idea."

"How can you have seen anything that me or my men didn't when we made our investigation?"

"The wind must have uncovered it."

"Well? What did you see and where was it?"

"I'm almost certain it—damn!"

The flashlight battery had given out at last, plunging them into darkness except for the moonlight.

Felix promptly descended to all fours and began moving his fingers gently in the sand. He muttered under his breath, not feeling able to say what was on his mind so that they'd all hear it.

"Darling, what *is* this?" Laura asked insistently. "Tell me and we'll get busy helping you."

"I was right, I was right," Felix called out exultantly. He carried something flat that was no bigger than his right hand. His left was half-turned into a fist.

"Will you take these, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"'These'?" Vogel was startled into anger. "If this is some kind of a trick, I'll personally lock you in jail and throw out the key."

The item in Felix's right hand was transferred first. Vogel touched it gingerly with his free hand, then said:

"It looks like a dead rubber ball squeezed flat——oh, wait a minute! You told us that Clymer had been experimenting with something like that. It was a practical joke. Are you telling me that you saw it from all the way up on the bridge?"

"I saw this other thing flat on top of it. Nobody could mistake the glitter."

It was a contact lens. Vogel took it into his free hand as if he expected the thing to blow up.

"You can check if the prescription for Clymer's glasses matches this," Felix said, shyness forgotten as the words tumbled over one another in his eagerness. "I've heard that nobody really knows where items will

fall in an accident, and here's proof of what really happened to Clymer."

"I think you're absolutely right," Vogel said slowly and carefully, "but not in the way I'm pretty sure you mean. In fact, Page, I think you've just cooked your own goose."

Felix was too shocked to give any answer. He stood open-mouthed and wide-eyed, waiting to hear what else Vogel was going to say.

"You're a smart cookie, my friend," Vogel went on, "but it's a mistake to tangle with a man working at his profession. You're going to tell me, I'm sure, that after you heard gunshots on the bridge, Clymer dropped this rubber gizmo and then tripped over it so that he lost his balance and fell. This rubber gizmo fell over at the same time, but now you've found it and everything's fine. Well, you might get a jury to go along with that —*if* you've got an exceptionally fine lawyer."

Felix was shaking his head fiercely.

Laura leaned toward him. "Tell Mr. Vogel what's on your mind, dear. *Please.*"

"Suppose I get a chance to finish, first." Vogel looked relaxed now, and his smile was slow but good-humored. "You really overreached yourself by 'finding' this, my friend. All you had to do was to steal it out of Clymer's pocket when you came down here to 'inspect' his dead body. And, of course, you popped one of the contact lenses out of an eye. But it's not going to work and I'll prove it to you."

Felix waited.

"Your wife asked me before about the final post-mortem results. It happens that Clymer's neck was broken by the fall; but that alone isn't the good news you might think it is. You see, the outfit that Oscar Clymer wore at that time was carefully gone over, too. Some of his pockets were inside out when he was found, as if he'd been searched."

Felix managed to say, "The accident turned his pockets out as he was falling. I noticed what had happened to most of his pockets when I came down here."

"Uh-huh, but there's also a partial rip at the back and there are fingerprints; your prints, my friend."

"I might have touched him while we were walking together or when I felt for his heartb—" Felix snapped two fingers. "No, I remember what happened. I reached for him when he was falling, and that's how my prints got on Clymer's outfit."

"And I'm sure your wife will back you up," Vogel said tartly, "now you've told her what the story is."

"It's the truth!" Felix insisted. "And I didn't push the man over or rig up a story afterwards. Besides, I'm almost certain now that what happened to Clym—"

The words trailed off when he became aware of Vogel's skeptical look at him.

"I only wish I knew why you keep insisting that you heard shots, when I know damn well there's no trace of any bullets," the lieutenant said after a pause. "But we'll find that out when you're questioned. You thought you'd jump out of the frying pan with this little scheme of yours, but instead you've landed yourself right smack in the fire."

SIXTEEN

THE FIRST haze of dawn had appeared in the sky when Vogel's Chevvy, with its cargo of five people, drew up in front of the subdued elegance of Coralton.

Felix waited till the back door opened before he could bring himself to say, "Not those two. I don't want them in the house."

Vogel made a face, then turned to the Ulrics. "I'm sorry, folks, but this won't take long. Soon as Page gets some clothes together—easier to do it from here than the hotel he's been at—and calls a lawyer, we'll all be on our way out to Apocalypse."

Laura had already opened the outer door and Felix was directly back of her. They heard Vogel's steps as the lieutenant hurried to catch up.

In the musty hallway, barely lighted at one end, Laura said quietly:

"Let's not make any noise and wake—"

"Laura! Felix!" It was Selina Page's voice, and no disobedience would be brooked by the older woman. "Come into the summer room instantly!"

Felix turned around to get Vogel's agreement. The lieutenant gave a tired nod. He stayed behind them as they walked in.

Harvey was sitting at the table next to his mother, and he stood up at sight of Laura and Felix. He grinned from ear to ear.

"It's a good thing you're back, that's all I can tell you," he said. "I've been having kittens here, worrying about you. Anything can happen when you're in a car, and you might not be found for hours."

Felix gave his half-brother a nod and a smile, but he was watching his mother's face. Selina Page had become rigid at sight of Vogel bringing up the rear.

Felix said, "I'm under suspicion for having killed Oscar Clymer, and I've got to call a lawyer."

Selina Page glared at the lieutenant. "My son didn't do anything, and you can't arrest him."

Daylight coming through the picture window touched Vogel's tired face, and he swerved from the intrusion. His jaw looked tight and hard.

"Mrs. Page, I have a job to do. As a result, your son is under arrest. Give me some evidence to show that he's innocent, and I'll forget about taking him in."

Laura turned to her husband. "Felix, what did you think out there? You had something on your mind, but you couldn't bring yourself to tell it to the lieutenant. Well, you're in your own home now, dear, and with the people who are closest to you. I know there was some idea that had occurred to you, and I think we should hear it now."

"Tell us," Selina Page ordered.

But Felix didn't fall all over himself to do what his mother wanted as quickly as possible. Instead, smiling tentatively, he turned to Laura.

"The reason I didn't say anything when we were out there earlier, is that I can't be sure if my notion is any good till I check it out with somebody."

"With who?"

He touched Laura's hand reassuringly, then looked toward the table. His eyes narrowed as they travelled past his mother.

"Harvey, there's something I want to ask you," he said.

Vogel put in quietly, "*He*'ll say yes. Whatever anybody wants, he'll say yes."

"Listen to me, Harv," Felix said, his voice rising above the lieutenant's murmur. "You're a mechanic with a few patents to your credit and I'm an architect, but we both know something about miniaturizing."

"Right," Harvey nodded.

"We both know that it's possible to make smaller spaces do the work that was previously done in much larger spaces," Felix said carefully. "Transistor radios are one example, and transistorized tape recorders are another. Those are the first two I can think of."

"There are lots more," Harvey said with one of his usual ingratiating smiles. "For inst—"

"One point comes first, Harv, because there isn't much sense in mixing us up. What I want to know is this: would it be possible to take a rubber ball, a plain rubber ball, and change it so that it can be apparently crushed and will later spring back to its usual shape?"

Lieutenant Vogel's grin at the start of this questioning had been wiped off his face.

"Look here," he rapped out. "What are you two trying to pull on me?"

"Well, Harv?" Felix persisted, ignoring the interruption. "Would it be possible to do that?"

"I'm sure it would, if you think about it long enough," Harvey smiled. "I can't figure out the way to do it right now, Felix, but I'm sure I could if you gave me a little time."

Vogel muttered, "He'd be sure that houses can fly if you asked him in the right way."

"One more thing, Harv," Felix said. "Let's suppose that you want to construct a practical joke. Would it be possible to construct that rubber ball in such a way that after it's been crushed a few times some addition inside it will shock hell out of you by suddenly sounding as if three shots had been fired? Would a very small transistor tape recorder, for instance, do that?"

Vogel's face was coloring from gray to red. "This doesn't mean anything, no matter what he answers. Even if you're right, and it was done that way, and Clymer lost his balance from surprise, and fell,—that still won't get you off the hook for having done the job to Clymer. There's no evidence against anybody else, my friend. Motive and opportunity are against you, and so is the physical evidence of fingerprints. There's

one more point that knocks your idea into a cocked hat."

"Th—there couldn't be!"

"You were telling the truth, Page, and the rubber ball isn't something you probably had somebody dream up so that you could 'find' it conveniently later on. The inventor would have come forward to tell us about this 'joke', considering what happened to Clymer. Or at least one of Clymer's subordinates would've given us the whole story."

"But what would happen—" Felix suddenly stopped himself. He and Selina Page were looking at each other as though for the first time.

Laura urged him, "Go on, dear. Go on."

Felix shook his head twice. "I haven't got anything more to say. Call a lawyer, mother, and I'll be going in with Vogel."

Laura shouted, "No, wait, wait!"

"What's wrong with you?" Harvey asked as he came forward and frowned anxiously.

Keeping her voice at its normal pitch right then was the hardest job Laura had ever tackled. "Felix either knows something, or he's just thought of a possible answer to the whole business. But he'd rather go to jail than say another word about it."

Felix whirled on her. "I don't want to hear anything more from you on that subject, Laura, ever. I mean it."

"Somebody has to take care of you if you're not willing to."

"If you go on with this, Laura, it'll be the last time we ever see each other again, except in divorce court. I mean it, Laura. I mean it, God help me!"

There was no encouragement for her in any face. Felix was anguished; Selina coldly furious; Harvey biting his lower lip in discomfort at the soaring emotional temperature in the room. Vogel's face was as stolid as the windshield of his rugged car.

Laura told him, "I can't stand to think of you in prison, Felix."

"Nothing will happen to me."

"One of these people hates you," Laura said, "and you can't let yourself be destroyed."

"If you don't keep quiet about it, you'll be destroying what we have between us, Laura."

"We won't have anything if you're in prison." She turned away from him and looked at the sober-faced lieutenant. "Mr. Vogel, you may know that at my wedding there was some difficulty between Clymer and —and Harvey, over there."

Felix suddenly turned and walked over to his half-brother. Harvey smiled at the close contact, but politely gestured for silence from him.

"Harvey was badly humiliated at the wedding, and it was Clymer's fault; but Harvey decided to get even. He's a tinkerer, and he knew (Clymer talked about it often enough) that the man personally tested every new item that looked promising. Harvey invented a rubber-like ball that could be crushed and would spring back to its natural shape again. He didn't tell anybody, of course, and he didn't say that after the ball had been crushed for a certain number of times, it would lie flat and there would be the sound of gunshots. He sent it to Clymer anonymously, certain that Clymer would be shocked and embarrassed in public when the shots were heard."

"Go on." Vogel's interest had definitely been caught.

But Felix was murmuring to Harvey. It needed only a little of his persuasion before Harvey stood up and walked to the door. Felix was standing between Vogel and the door in such a position as to keep the lieutenant from making any move in that direction unless he wanted a direct collision.

"I asked him to get something for me," Felix said to Vogel. "He shouldn't have to be exposed to any such foolishness as what we're listening to."

"He can always be picked up if that's necessary," Vogel acknowledged. His eyes hadn't left Laura since she had started to talk against Harvey Page.

Sadly she went on, "Harvey didn't expect what hap-

pened, and when he found out that Clymer had been at a dangerous place when the shots had sounded, and been so startled that he lost his balance, he was too scared to come forward and say so. The possible consequences must have upset him pretty badly. Even the idea of having to take a car ride into Apocalypse would come close to sending Harvey into a state of near collapse, if I'm any judge."

"You've explained that pretty well," Vogel conceded. "But how come he tried to scare hell out of you earlier tonight? That doesn't seem to make sense."

Laura heard a muffled gasp, but didn't know from whom it had been drawn. Vogel was rigidly attentive, his lips taut. Felix looked everywhere but at her. Selina Page sat quietly with a bony hand covering her eyes. Laura looked toward the door and hesitated, but said nothing about her notion that Harvey was on the other side and hearing what was said in this room. She couldn't be sure of it, for one thing, and there wasn't any practical way of testing her idea, for another.

"I'm not certain that I can explain Harvey's actions either, about that part of it," she said slowly. "Maybe Harvey turned against his half-brother when he realized that *he* could get the successful and brilliant Felix Page into serious trouble. Maybe he identified with Felix so closely that he wanted to play the part of Felix, and he put on a jacket that's a duplicate of Felix's—you can certainly check if he has a gray jacket just like the one Felix is wearing now—and came into my room."

"There are too many gaps in a suggestion like that to make it convincing," Vogel said clearly and with even more hostility than he had been showing recently. "What's more, there's at least one point you simply can't explain."

"I'd like to hear what it is."

"Your notion—and I'm sure it was your husband's a little earlier—is that the crime was brought on indirectly by a malicious practical joke. It may not be a crime at all, technically, but a full investigation is cer-

tainly going to be needed on this whole idea. Now, Harvey Page would realize that the crushed ball could be traced to him soon after it was picked up; careful police work would show that the parts of the gizmo were exact duplicates of parts that had been in his possession a very short time ago. Agreed?"

"If you say so. I'm sure that men know much more about how the police do their jobs than women do."

"Granting that Harvey couldn't be accused of murder in a situation like that, there'd certainly be a small scandal. At the very least, public statements would need to be made, and a man like Harvey Page would be desperately anxious to avoid that sort of thing. The only way to arrange that is to destroy the evidence. Agreed?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right, then, there's the point. I'm sure that the shifting sand had hidden the evidence, but I want to know why Harvey didn't destroy it all the same. Why didn't he take a small sand dredger and go out to the canyon to get hold of the one piece of evidence which might give him some trouble in the future? It's absolutely insane to leave the crushed ball in the canyon, and Harvey Page is nowhere near being that crazy."

"Yes, Lieutenant," Laura said softly. "And that's the very point that gives Harvey away."

"You'll have to explain it."

Tentatively, Laura glanced at her husband. "Please tell him the rest of it, Felix. Please do one thing, at least, to keep yourself out of this trouble."

Felix had turned his back on her and was facing the door. His back stiffened in the silence imposed on him by family obligations. From his behavior, Laura might almost not have been in the same room.

"It's up to you, then," Vogel said briskly. "You'll have to tell me why Harvey Page left incriminating material against himself which might be found by somebody else, and eventually get into the police's hands."

"Harvey couldn't bring himself to go out there for it," Laura told him in a flat and empty voice. "He's

always been terrified of automobiles, and he hasn't left Coralton or its grounds since he was a teen-ager. That's why Harvey had to let the evidence stay there."

Vogel digested it in silence. "Makes sense," he decided. "I'm kind of sorry for him, but he certainly has to come downtown and give us at least one statement. I suppose I could bring my people up here this time, but not for follow-up statements. And for all I know, there may be some legal action by the D.A.'s office, which means that since nobody would bring a courtroom out to Coralton, Harvey would need to appear. I think you ought to start preparing the man for what's almost certainly going to happen in the near futu—"

He was interrupted by the sound—from just outside the summer room—of a pistol shot.

Selina Page called out, "Harvey! What have you done?"

Felix was already at the door; Vogel close behind him. Laura, last to leave the summer room, snapped the door shut in back of her to keep the older woman from seeing so ghastly a sight.

Harvey Page lay on the hall floor, his eyes wide open. The gun in his right hand was no larger than a fountain pen, but he had used it to make a blood-streaked hole in his right temple; no doubt that gun was a new contrivance, with which he had been tinkering. There was a smell near his face that reminded Laura of gasoline.

Vogel bent over him, feeling for a pulse. When he looked up, he was shaking his head gravely. He glanced toward the summer room, and sighed with relief at seeing that the door had been closed. But he winced as he heard Selina Page's cane strike the floor, bringing her toward the barrier that kept her from seeing what a son of hers had done to himself.

"My fault," Vogel said quietly. "I thought I heard him on the other side of the door, but I talked too much about the troubles he was likely to have."

Felix said bitterly, "It was *her* fault."

"But I had to—" Laura began.

"She practically made Harvey kill himself, and I suppose that now she's happy."

He turned abruptly and waited for his mother to open the door. As the door opened on Selina Page, gray-faced and walking with unaccustomed difficulty, Laura felt certain that the events of the last few moments had clinched her loss of Felix Page. She had kept him out of the twin grips of prison and scandal, but by doing it, she had lost him; she had lost him forever and ever.

SEVENTEEN

NOBODY HAD to tell Laura to pack.

She did it herself as the sun rose to its morning height. In the last few weeks, she had accumulated so many additional items that she hardly knew where to put them. Her life had taught her that good things were transitory, but that her relations with Felix should have been on the same level was almost impossibly hard to accept.

And yet . . .

Hadn't she come here, in a way, under false pretenses? Hadn't she wanted security more than anything else? She had built her entire previous life on a desire for stability, even going into a profession that was taken for granted as a stepping stone to a comfortable marriage. She could be called a social climber. It was pure accident that her regard for Felix should have become so warm, and that she would miss him so terribly.

Close to tears, she turned away from the sight of her bridal gown and veil.

The ringing phone kept her from an outburst of tears. Jack Noland, the oil man who'd quarrelled with Felix one night at Coralton, was on the other end.

"I'm calling Felix's personal line because I've got a message for him," Noland said, after inquiring about Laura and reacting politely to her non-committal answers. "Have him call me right away. Tell him it's about his propositions for what he refers to as 'saving' El Norte. Tell him that the news of his having been

cleared of suspicion of murder has gotten around very quickly, and it's making a difference to his neighbors."

Laura managed to hang up shortly afterwards without having revealed her state of mind to Noland. She wasn't able to contact the servants, who were probably on call because of the morning emergency. As a result, Laura wrote out the message on a piece of paper and brought it downstairs.

She planned to leave it on the dining room table, where it couldn't be missed. On her way to the dining room, though, she heard Selina Page's voice raised behind a closed door. She was in one of the salons, and her words were clear and unequivocal.

". . . feel just as badly as you do about what happened. Worse, I'm sure. What they say about a mother's love, Felix, isn't at all exaggerated."

Laura heard Felix's voice without being able to make out what he was saying. The knowledge that he was so close to her caused Laura to tremble violently.

"In all fairness, Felix, the girl worked for you and in your behalf. Nothing else is more important as far as you're concerned."

To hear Selina Page take Laura's side was an added impossibility on this deadful day.

"Yes, even against me," Selina Page was saying. "A girl who acts for you against the whole world is the one person you shouldn't let leave you."

They were in the Spanish salon. Laura knocked softly on the door and walked in. Selina Page was sitting on one of the showy chairs. Felix whirled around when she came in, his hard eyes blazing. Laura noticed with a wifely concern that she couldn't help, that a half-length coat was draped loosely around him; he'd come in from the outside and hadn't yet taken the darned thing off.

"You've had a phone call from Jack Noland," Laura said, handing him the message. "It's about future plans for El Norte."

Without a word to Laura, he wheeled around and went to make the call. Selina Page, dry-eyed but ab-

stracted, sat with hands over her eyes till Felix returned. Laura's husband had no word for her, but he seemed filled with subdued pride when he talked to Selina.

"They want to send me to Jaxville to make a case before the State Highway Commission," Felix said. "I'm to follow my original plans for controlled expansion, but to add that we want zoning laws to keep the number of new houses down and to keep those that are built, clustered together—which is what Oscar Clymer was suggesting, by the way. And I told Jack, I'd also recommend that any new houses shouldn't be more than two stories high—with an attic, of course—and that new structures should be put up only where they don't break into the skyline."

Laura couldn't help saying, "Jack and the others were so impressed to hear you last night at the public rally, that they couldn't turn to anyb—"

She had said the wrong thing again, or perhaps anything she said would've been wrong. Felix was looking at her as if she were a stranger.

Selina Page said. with surprising reasonableness, "I know it isn't everything you wanted, Felix, but it's possible that we simply don't have the right to keep some other people out of El Norte as residents."

Felix couldn't bring himself to look away from the sight of his wife. Having noticed his preoccupation, Selina Page stood up swiftly.

"Remember, Felix, do what I told you," she said, and left the room. They could hear the tip of her cane along the hallway for moments after the door had been closed.

"Harvey wasn't as mentally mixed-up as you tried to make him sound when you gave the story to Vogel," Felix said suddenly. "Harvey tried to scare you like that because he'd been asked to do it by somebody to whom he felt loyalty. I got the truth from Gordon Ulric before he and Janice and Vogel left in that old car a few minutes ago."

Laura wanted to ask him what loyalty Harvey could

have felt for Gordon Ulric. With Felix in the same room, she was finding it harder to talk, and she felt sure that her voice wouldn't sound even remotely normal.

Luckily, Felix answered the unspoken question.

"Harvey did what Gordon asked him to and gave you a scare that might be blamed on me. There are two reasons for Harvey doing it. In the first place it was hard for him to say no to anybody he felt close to; and in the second place Gordon Ulric was his uncle."

"His—uncle, did you say?" Laura's voice was at approximately its usual pitch.

"Gordon's late brother was Harvey's dad and my mother's first husband," Felix said coolly. "You've heard that everybody in El Norte has known each other for a long, long time. As a result, *we've* got a certain loyalty to each other."

Laura answered the real accusation in his words.

"But you think I was disloyal because I helped you and not Harvey," she said. "I don't agree with you, but I'm tired of having one long argument about it."

"What does that mean?" He had been stung.

"Only that I'll be glad, in one way, to be leaving."

"You know what my mother thinks?" he asked coolly. "Her notion is that I ought to grab you by the hair till you agree to stay."

"Thank her for wanting me at Coralton, Felix, if I don't get to see her again before I leave."

"I don't think that the two of you would ever be pals, but at least she appreciates you," Felix said. "I don't agree with my mother about what she wants, though, and it's my life we're talking about—not to mention yours."

"Very well, Felix. I understand that things are finished between us. A boy I used to know once said to me that there are happy beginnings in a relationship, and there can be happy middles in a relationship, but there are no happy endings."

"You *want* to go, don't you?" he asked.

"In the circumstances, I think I ought to."

Felix hesitated, then blurted out, "If I hadn't seen you before you left, Laura, I'd have gone upstairs to talk to you."

"About a divorce?" She picked the words to sting. "I'll start an action as soon as I get back to New York, if it's what you prefer."

"That would be up to you," Felix said coldly. "I can't stop you from doing it, if you've made up your mind."

She wanted to tell him that he could stop her with the flick of an eyelash or the waggle of a finger. Being forced to stand ten feet away from him and look at those sharp fine features she knew so well was a special torture, not like any to which Laura had ever before been exposed.

"Well, then, Felix, that's all," she said after a brief silence. "Goodbye."

"No, wait."

"Is there something I've forgotten? I'll leave all the keys with Susan before I go."

"Damn it, Laura, don't make things so hard for me!" he burst out.

"We're making things hard for each other," she said quietly. "It'll be better if I go as soon as possible."

"Just let me say one thing before you go."

"Of course, Felix."

But the torture of being so close to him and yet a stranger was likely to stretch out till her nerves would be crushed like eggshells in a huge fist.

"I think that what's happened to me in the last few weeks has done a lot to smooth my temper down," he said finally. "That may sound crazy to you, Laura, but I mean it. To know that I was suspected of murder and that you were given a rough time by somebody else, only because I'm known to have such a bad temper that it can be used by anyone who's scheming against me—well, as I say, it's enough to make any man think twice about himself, and decide that he can't make a success out of his life unless he gets some changes underway as soon as possible."

"Nothing could make me happier," Laura said evenly, "than to know that you won't be vulnerable to such a horrid experience any longer."

"Thank you, Laura, and I know you mean it. But that isn't all I wanted to say."

Laura, having turned to go, made herself look back at him. She couldn't remember how many times she had held his sharp chin against her palm, but the memory was painfully vivid.

"I know you can hardly wait to get out of my sight, Laura, but we did have something good between us not too long ago, and for that reason alone, I'm asking you to be patient a little longer. It's just that I'm trying to find the words. You know it's hard for me to say exactly what I want to."

"It was relatively easy for you at the rally last night," she nearly smiled, "and I'm sure it won't be hard for you at Jacksonville, even if you will be playing into Gordon Ulric's hands by what you tell the State Commission."

His head snapped back. "I'm not doing Gordon Ulric any favors. He wanted to put up big buildings, and he won't be able to."

"No, but he'll get to put up a few houses, and with your agreement."

"He will not," Felix said positively. "Ulric's land is positioned so that he couldn't put up an outhouse without its interfering with the skyline of El Norte, and I specifically made a point of saying that no structures interfering with the skyline would be tolerated. And the nature of the land is such that he can't hope to blast away and level it without—oh, forget about Gordon Ulric! We're alone for the last time in months, maybe, and we don't have to stand here and talk about Gordon Ulric or his daughter."

Laura promptly echoed, " 'We're alone for the last time in months, maybe'. I thought that we were alone for the last time, period."

"I hope not."

"Felix, please, please tell me exactly what it is that you want to get off your chest."

"It seemed to me that instead of putting pressure on you to stay, as my mother wants, I should spend a few months by myself and see if I'm right about my self-control being much better. And if I am right, we could be together again. That is, of course, if you want us to be."

Laura remembered only vaguely that she had ever been planning to leave Coralton and had never expected to hear one more word of affection, real or implied, from her man. In time, the recollection would be swept out of her mind, as if such a situation had never existed.

"Then you expect me to wait for you," she said carefully, "till you feel that it's all right to expose yourself to me again."

"You make it sound as if I were sick, Laura. I've had a rotten temper in my lifetime, but I'm not crazy."

"You gave me a little lecture on loyalty before this, Felix, if you recall. You told me that Harvey acted, in part, against his own wishes, because he felt loyal to his uncle. But my loyalties are less complicated. You're the only person I want to be with; the only person I want to help."

"Then you'll wait for me," he said, smiling slowly. "Laura, I promise you won't regret it."

"I won't spend a day waiting," Laura said. "I'm going to do exactly what your mother wants. I'm staying. I'll be here at Coralton."

"But you can't do that. I'm liable to—well, I know I won't. But how can we both be sure?"

"When I was upstairs a few minutes ago, packing my clothes," Laura said, "I told myself that I had married you mainly because I wanted to be secure, and that it was only a matter of luck that I had fallen in love with you. But that isn't really true, I think. I was telling myself a story to make me feel better—only a little better—for leaving here. It was my particular 'out,' so to speak."

"And you think I'm telling myself a different kind of story to justify—what?"

"A 'vacation' from marriage, which you don't really want any more than I'd look forward to leaving Coralton."

"It isn't a matter of wanting or not." Felix rubbed his hands on a pocket handkerchief. "There's no choice."

"You can take me with you to Jacksonville as part of that honeymoon we haven't had yet," Laura said, her eyes sparkling. "If you want to pitch in and make this marriage work, dear, we can do it together. And we will, Felix. I know that now."

"But look here," Felix said, coming closer to her almost in spite of himself and taking her hands in his. "You do need physical security at the very least. Whether you admit it or not, Laura, that's one of the reasons why a woman gets married."

"You're right, of course, in a way."

"Well, then, you shouldn't want to spend the rest of your life with a man who might just barely possibly haul off once in a very great while and let you have it."

"I'm sure you won't."

"So am I, actually, now, Laura. But you can't be a hundred per cent sure. Why do you want to take the chance?"

"There are more important things in the world than security," said Laura Foster.

IMPORTANT! To receive free advance news of exciting new DOMINO BOOKS each month send your name and address to:

LANCER BOOKS, INC. • Dept. PDC
185 Madison Avenue • New York, New York 10016

DON'T MISS ANY OF THESE LANCER GOTHIC-SUSPENSE ROMANCES!

72-779	THE MOONFLOWER	Phyllis Whitney	.50
72-780	SECRET MELODY	Paula Minton	.50
72-784	SEASON OF EVIL	Elsie Lee	.50
72-791	MISTRESS OF MOUNT FAIR	Jane Gordon	.50
72-796	HERITAGE OF FOLLY	Catherine Marchant	.50
72-797	MOSTLY BY MOONLIGHT	Dorothy Daniels	.50
72-908	EVIL IN THE HOUSE	Evelyn Bond	.50
72-909	DAY OF THE ARROW	Philip Loraine	.50
72-911	NIGHTMARE IN JULY	Clara Coleman	.50
72-919	CLOUDS OVER VELLANTI	Elsie Lee	.50
72-920	THE BROODING HOUSE	Alice Brennan	.50
72-926	ENGRAVED IN EVIL	Paula Minton	.50
72-927	TRYST WITH TERROR	Wilma Winthrop	.50
72-928	CURSE OF THE ISLAND POOL	Virginia Coffman	.50
72-932	HOUSE OF FOUR WIDOWS	Delphine C. Lyons	.50
72-933	THE UNGUARDED	Dorothy Daniels	.50
72-934	DARK MOON, LOST LADY	Elsie Lee	.50
72-944	EVIL AT RODGER'S CROSS	Catherine Marchant	.50

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

72-945	RAVENKILL	Paulette Warren	.50
72-946	HOUSE OF SHADOWS	Evelyn Bond	.50
73-436	HOUSE OF MEN	Catherine Marchant	.60
73-443	HOUSE ON THE FENS	Catherine Marchant	.60

SPECIAL MONEY-SAVING OFFER

ANY 4 TITLES FOR ONLY $2.00

ANY 8 TITLES FOR ONLY $4.00

IF THESE BOOKS ARE NOT AVAILABLE AT YOUR NEWSSTAND USE THIS COUPON

TO: LANCER BOOKS, INC.
185 MADISON AVENUE
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10016

PLEASE SEND ME THE GOTHIC-SUSPENSE ROMANCES I HAVE CIRCLED BELOW.

72-779 72-780 72-784 72-791 72-796 72-797 72-908 72-909
72-911 72-919 72-920 72-926 72-927 72-928 72-932 72-933
72-934 72-944 72-945 72-946 73-436 73-443

I ENCLOSE $

(For orders of less than 4 books please add 10¢ per book for postage and handling.)

A LANCER BOOK • NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED

OF LOVE AND VIOLENCE

Laura Foster loved Felix Page deeply and devotedly . . . but she had also had a glimpse of the raging demon that brooded beneath the outward mien of the usually gentle-mannered young architect.

And the untamable rage that sometimes possessed him was not the only barrier to their happy marriage. There was also Felix's mother, who made no secret of her hatred for Laura. And there were many other enemies, both seen and invisible . . .

And in that weathered old Florida house, all of the forces of evil gathered silently and with evil whispers prepared for the final attack . . . while Laura faced the darkness with fear—but determination!